TALES FOR THE HORRID AT HEART

FANTASTIC

ANUARY

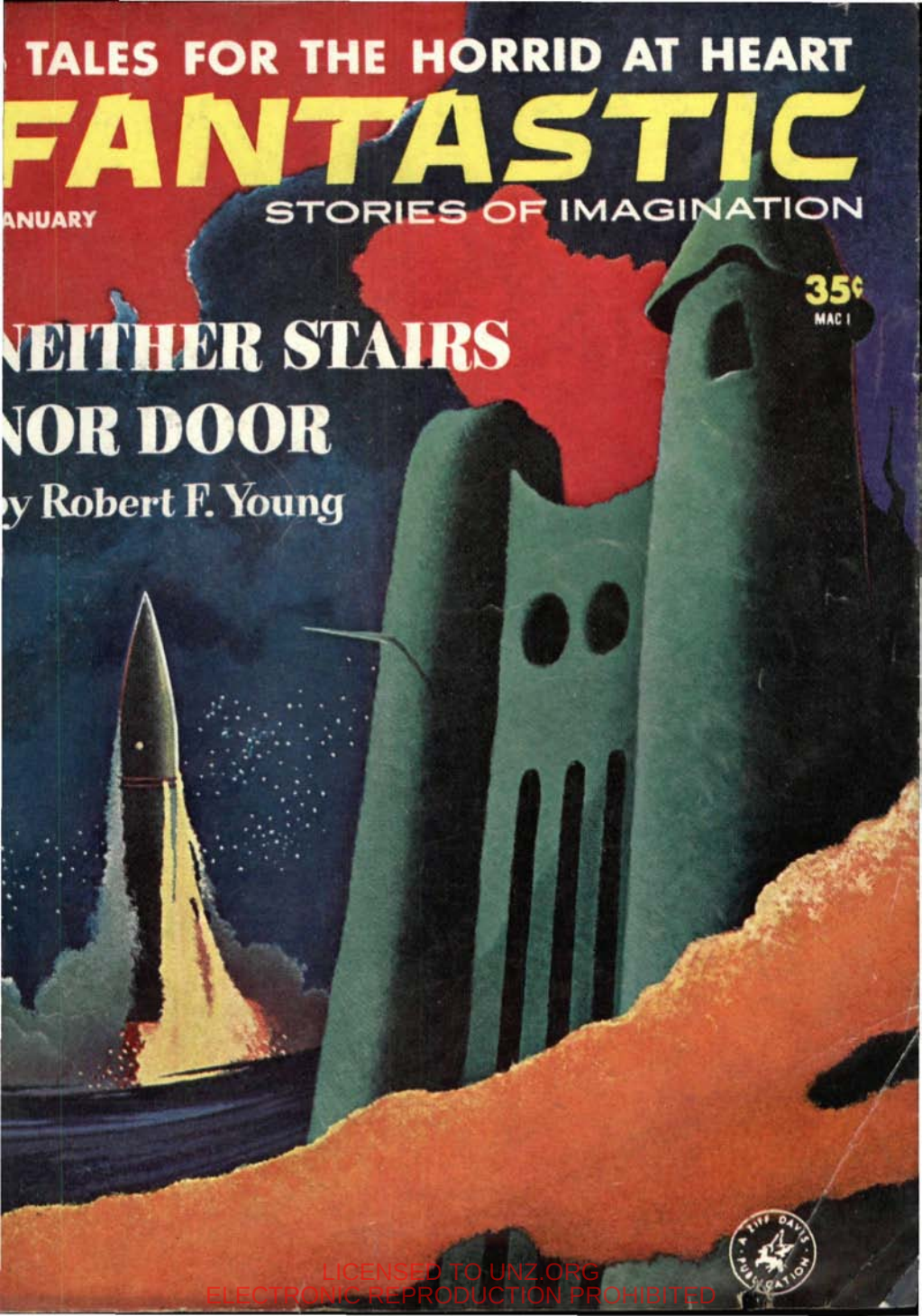
STORIES OF IMAGINATION

35¢

MAC I

NEITHER STAIRS NOR DOOR

by Robert F. Young



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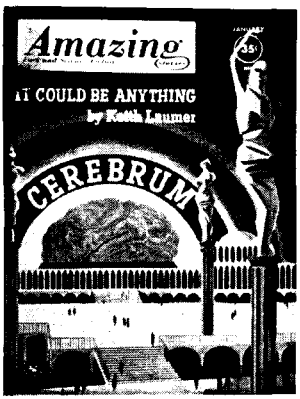

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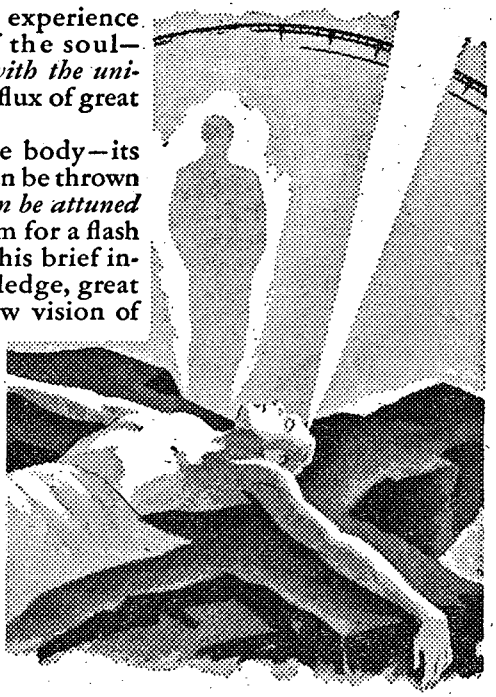

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FANTASTIC

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

JANUARY 1963

Volume 12 Number 1

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF

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Ziff-Davis Publishing Company
Editorial and Executive Offices
One Park Avenue
New York 16, New York
ORegon 9-7200
Advertising Manager,
Martin Gluckman

Midwestern and Circulation Office
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Illustrating *Neither Stairs nor Door*

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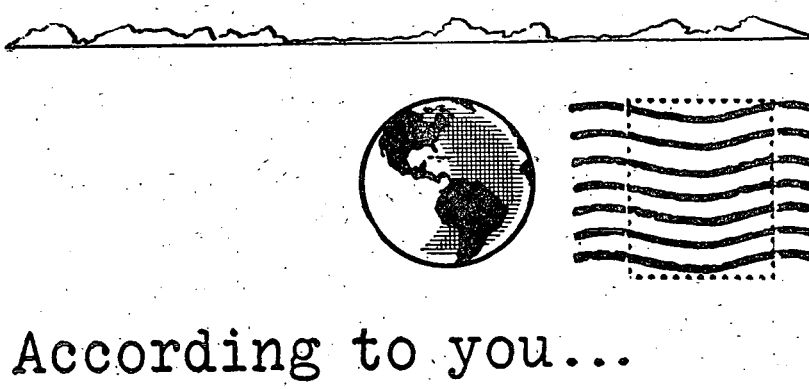

According to you...

Dear Editor:

I am shocked, surprised, bemused, and gratified. I am an old sf fan of several years' standing, but never have I considered FANTASTIC and its attendant twin, AMAZING, anything other than adequate lining for my garbage pail. The mediocre stories were definitely not offset by a goshwowoboy letter column lifting paeans of praise to such tin gods as Burroughs, whose stories seem calculated to impair my digestion and set me off sf for a month. But to return to the point. Gentlemen, I must apologize—in part. I am not sorry for my former opinions concerning your magazines, nor for my present one, which is still none too high. But I see you are capable of an occasional story of high quality. I am, of course, referring to "The Unholy Grail" in the October issue. This is my first acquaintance with the Grey Mouser, and I assure you 'twill not be the last. This story was absolutely superb in characterization, in style, and above all, in its wonderfully eery atmosphere.

The rest of your stories were passable ("passable" stories do not merit my hard-earned thirty-five cents!) "Presence of Mind" was witty, urbane, and not at all my cup o' tea, guv'nor. Geoffrey Wagner's "Autogeddon" seems to be, unfortunately, a hybrid of a couple of others I read a few years back in one of your competitors. But originality seems to be a rare quality in your contributors (sparing Mr. Leiber, of course), so let's not tax the poor boy too greatly.

More of Grey Mouser, please and pretty please. I absolutely refuse to praise the cover and illustrations, except to say I found them effective. Too often I have been privileged (!) to read in the letter column, "Goshwowoboy, that cover was terrif!"

(Continued on page 125)

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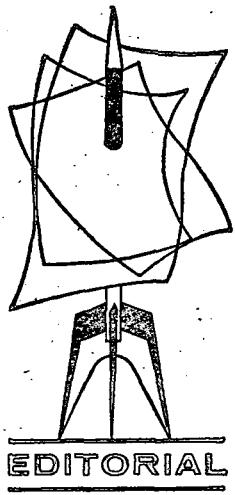

NOT very long ago an extremely provocative book was published. The chances are, the publishing business being what it is, that few of you will ever hear of it; even fewer of you will read it. Because we felt that the main argument of the book deserved to be brought before the kind of open-minded intelligence FANTASTIC'S readers have, we bought excerpts from the book. They are presented in this issue.

Ghost and Ghoul is a frank exploration into the world of the supernatural. It also offers an equally frank attempt to explain this world in terms of natural law—even though some of these laws remain to be discovered and formulated. To enable you to judge, you should know that the author of the book, T. C. Lethbridge, is a noted British archeologist. He specializes in research involving Britain's ancient gods, and has led expeditions for the Cambridge Antiquarian Society, and for the University Museum of Archeology and Ethnology. Lethbridge's archeological tours led him, at times, to personal experiences with what we call the supernatural—ghosts, ghouls, "future memory" dreams, sensitives and prophetesses, and such incidents as the unexplained breakdown of perfectly good automobiles in which were being transported prehistoric skeletons. His comments on these experiences, the publishers point out, are "not the emotional ramblings of a highly impressionable person, but the clinical, objective reports of a highly respected scientist!"

Basically, Lethbridge suggests the existence of a natural force as the motive power behind much of what we call supernatural. Those of us whose minds can stand the strain, he suggests, may be able, willfully or not, to "tune in on" and use this natural force.

There will be, we think, a good deal of discussion of Lethbridge's theories—especially since some of them call for a re-evaluation of old ones, such as the discarding of Darwin's evolutionary theory. Still, no matter which side you may stand on, the theories themselves are fascinating—and will lead you into stimulating argument. And now—on to page 48, to Mr. Lethbridge, and his observations about GHOST AND GHOUL.

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By

ROBERT F. YOUNG

Illustrator KRAMER

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The tower lay in the midst of the forest, and though the peasant girl's eyes were wide with fright and mystery, she could see it had . . .

neither stairs nor door

FRAU Schnabel did not see the spaceship land, nor did she see it blast off. If she had witnessed either occurrence, the romantic tale which she was to tell later on—the true source of which has only recently come to light—would probably never have been related; for a person's perspective is arbitrarily governed by his thought-world, and while *Frau* Schnabel had no trouble interpreting what she did see, Newton's third law of dynamics in action would undoubtedly have posed a problem much too complex for her medieval mind to cope with.

Strictly speaking, the spaceship wasn't really a spaceship—it was, in the gobbledygook of the Metennabulite navy, a ship-to-planet-planet-to-ship contact-vehicle, and compared to its orbiting mother-ship, it was a very small fish in the pond, indeed. But to *Frau* Schnabel, when she first set eyes on it, it looked as large as a house—or, to be more exact, a tower. The circumstances leading up to this memorable moment are worth examining.

"Mother" had wandered far from her native shore, consuming, in the process, much of her food supply, and her larder was badly in need of replenishing. Her captain, consequently, had put in to the system nearest her trajectory, and established her in orbit around the planet with the highest uranium-content reading—the third one out from the sun. Not long thereafter, her matter-detector registered a rich pitchblende deposit on one of the planet's larger continents, and a STPPTSCV was immediately sent down, with a *crew of one*, for the purpose of pinpointing the part of the deposit that contained the maximum amount of uranium oxide. Once the proper co-ordinates were relayed back, a transfer-beam would be

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directed upon the area and the uranium oxide would be extracted and transmitted simultaneously.

The "crew of one" was named Anaxel, and by Metennabulite standards, he was an ordinary enough individual. In common with most Metennabulite males, he was tall, noble of mien, had regular features and curly brown hair; and, in common with his fellow crew-members, he wore the regulation Metennabulite-navy uniform, attire consisting of a white coat-blouse, pale-blue, jodhpur-like trousers, and gilt leather boots. He knew his job and he knew it well, and the STPPTSCV had no sooner settled on its metal haunches in the clearing of a small forest than he set about accomplishing his mission. First he donned his communicator-helmet—a tiara-like affair comprised of an intricate network of silvery wires—then he disengaged the lock and stepped into the stirrup of the boarding cable. The cable lowered him gently from the lofty lock to the ground, withdrew like a lazy golden serpent when he released it. Finally he set forth into the forest, his eyes flicking every now and then to his uranium detector, which was inset in a gold ring on the index finger of his right hand and which looked for all the world like a large and resplendent ruby.

HE ranged far and wide, but it was not till late in the afternoon, when he was on his way back to the ship, that the detector began emitting the series of flashes he was waiting for. After rotating the ring several times, he set off in the direction that evoked the most rapid reaction, his eyes focused on the detector. So great was his absorption in his task that, arriving in a small clearing, he failed to see the young woman who was kneeling in the middle of a bed of blue flowers till he was on the verge of tripping over her. She failed to see him too at first, so busily engaged was she in pulling up the flowers and nibbling away at their roots, and when she finally did become aware of him and looked up, startled, from her quaint repast, his knee was only inches away from her nose.

She was round-faced and flaxen-haired, and she had the biggest blue eyes that Anaxel had ever seen. They proceeded to grow even bigger, and for an alarmed moment he was afraid that they were going to pop out of their sockets and fall into the bed of flowers. She seemed bereft of movement, and for a long while she went on kneeling at his feet somewhat in the manner of a supplicating statue, although the effect was somewhat marred by the coarse garment that covered her from neck to

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ankles. At last, however, she came back to life, and after standing up, she backed across the clearing in a series of curtsies that bordered on genuflections, and disappeared among the trees.

To say that Anaxel was puzzled by her actions would be gainsaying the truth. He simply wasn't *interested* enough to be puzzled. He was a technician, not an anthropologist, and while he knew enough about the world on which he stood to be aware that this particular section of it was in the middle of a dark-ages period, he hadn't the slightest desire to embellish his knowledge with details. When he returned to the mother-ship he would, in accordance with regulations, turn in a written report of everything he had seen and heard, but he could see little point in seeing or hearing any more than he actually had to. He had a one-track mind, and at the moment all that concerned him was the location of the main uranium-oxide deposit. Hence, far from being puzzled by the young woman's actions, he forgot all about her two seconds after she disappeared into the forest.

But, while *Frau* Schnabel may have aroused no interest in Anaxel, Anaxel aroused plenty of interest in *Frau* Schnabel, and unknown to him, a pair of blue eyes devoured his every movement for the rest of the afternoon, and after dusk settled over the forest and he started back to the ship, deferring his prospecting activities till the morrow, that same pair of blue eyes were upon him every inch of the way. They were still upon him when he reached the ship, and if he could have seen them when he gave voice to the sonic password that activated the boarding cable, and if he could have seen them a moment later when the thick golden cable emerged from the lock and came undulating down to the ground, he would have bet his last *murkel* that in another second they would pop right out of her head. And it wouldn't have been a bad bet either, because when the cable drew him up into the lock, they almost did.

AFTER the lock closed, *Frau* Schnabel headed directly for the little wood-cutter's cabin which she shared with her middle-aged husband, Peter. Peter was already there, brooding darkly by the hearth, when she arrived, and the word-whipping which he proceeded to give her brought tears to her blue eyes. It was bad enough, he said, that after two years of marriage she had failed to beget him a son, without her gallivanting in the woods every afternoon when she

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should be home feeding the pigs and getting his supper. She had been dying to tell him about her wondrous experience, but now she could not, and her mind sought desperately for someone else she could tell about it. Alas, there was no one. Her parents were dead, and she and Peter were the only people for miles around, save for an old woman who lived in a run-down cabin at the edge of the woods; but *Frau* Schnabel had it on the very best authority—her husband's—that the old woman was a witch, and she didn't dare go near her. So she went to bed after supper without having revealed her experience to anyone, and during the night, while she tossed and turned beside her snoring husband in the drafty loft above the pigpen, the events of the afternoon whirled dizzily in her head and got mixed up with her loneliness and the sweet roots she had lately developed a craving for and the old woman who lived at the edge of the woods, and by morning they had tentatively acquired the form which she was eventually to give them.

Peter had no sooner left the house than she was off into the woods, eager to see the marvelous tower—and its resplendent occupant—again. Just as she came within sight of it, the golden cable emerged and lowered Anaxel to the ground. She gave a little gasp and hopped birdlike behind a nearby tree and peered around the trunk. When he entered the forest, Anaxel passed so close to her that she could have reached out and touched him—if she had dared. She followed, keeping as close to him as she could, her heart hammering in cadence with her short quick steps.

All unawares of the blue eyes upon him, Anaxel headed straight for the spot where he had left off prospecting the previous evening. By mid-morning he had the main uranium-oxide deposit pinpointed to his satisfaction, and he transmitted the co-ordinates to the mother-ship. He wasted no time in getting out of the danger-area. The mother-ship was above the dawn-belt and would be in a position to make the transfer any minute now, and soon the transfer-beam would flash down out of the blue and sink its invisible fingers into the forest. In a way, it was like picking a planet's pockets; but this much, at least, can be said for the Metennabulite navy—it never picked a planet's pockets unless it had to, and it never filched more uranium than it needed.

Suddenly a blur of movement within the danger area caught Anaxel's eyes. It was accompanied by a flash of yellow hair. Belatedly he remembered the

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young woman he had almost stumbled over the previous afternoon. Was it possible that she was still within the vicinity?

He could afford to take no chances. Human life—even alien human life—was highly esteemed in the Metennabulite civilization, and contact with a transfer-beam was invariably fatal. Hence, at the risk of his own life, he plunged into the forest, and when he came upon *Frau* Schnabel crouching behind a gooseberry bush, he whisked her into his arms and sped out of the danger area with her. He had no sooner reached safety when a dull rumble apprised him that the transfer-beam had done its work and that now his job was finished. Setting *Frau* Schnabel unceremoniously upon her feet, he headed back for the STPPTSCV.

FOR a long while *Frau* Schnabel did not move. Seeing her standing there, staring at the section of the undergrowth into which Anaxel had disappeared, you would have thought that a piece of the sky had fallen upon her head and stunned her, and in a sense, that is precisely what had happened. Years would come and years would go, but she would never be the same *Frau* Schnabel again.

Finally she essayed a tentative step in the direction Anaxel had taken. When she did not wake up in her wooden bed in the loft above the pigpen and was reasonably certain that she was not dreaming, she set off in his wake. Shortly before she reached the clearing in which the enchanted tower stood, she heard the sound of thunder receding in the distance. But she did not connect it with the emptiness that met her eyes when she finally broke free from the forest. There was no reason why she should have done so: magic towers, when they disappear, do so silently. They are there one minute, and gone the next.

Sobbing, she sank down on the ground, and her tears fell one by one upon the coarse material of her dress. She had known from the moment the King's son had spoken the magic words that for her there could be no hope, but somehow she had gone on hoping anyway, and when he had picked her up and started to carry her away, that hope had flared into sudden brightness like a candle-flame in a wind. But why had he changed his mind and returned instead to the enchanted tower and his golden-haired princess? Had she, *Frau* Schnabel, offended him in any way?

She did not think so, and the more she thought about the matter, the more inclined she was to believe that the King's son's ac-

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tion stemmed from his having decided at the very last second that his obligations to his princess and his country far outweighed his obligations to the poor peasant girl who had unaccountably swept him off his feet. After all, it was only natural that a King's son should have have high principles. None of which explained the tower's disappearance; but *Frau* Schnabel had come to the conclusion quite some time ago that the old woman who lived at the edge of the woods had something to do with the tower, and, as everyone knew, witches were always making things disappear.

Understandably enough, *Frau* Schnabel was simply bursting by now to tell someone about her adventure. But whom could she tell? Certainly not her husband; a King's son was a fitting enough topic for a wife to talk about, but not when said King's son had picked up said wife in his arms with the apparent purpose of carrying her away to a far land, there to live happily with her ever after. And since her parents were dead, she couldn't very well tell them—and anyway, they probably wouldn't believe her even if they were around to listen. Whom, then? There was utterly no one, save Dame Gothel, the old woman who lived at the edge of the woods. *Frau* Schnabel sighed. She would rather die than tell her.

NEVERTHELESS, as matters turned out, it was Dame Gothel whom she did tell, for Dame Gothel, in addition to being a witch, was also a midwife, and *Frau* Schnable, unknown to herself, had been pregnant for some time. Her recent penchant for rampion, to say nothing of certain other signs, should have apprised her of the fact; but no one had ever taken the trouble to tell her about the birds and the bees, and up until the last moment, she remained completely innocent of her condition.

The account of her adventure that she gave Dame Gothel, however, is far from being a factual one, not only because of her inherent romanticism but because she gave most of it while she was half out of her head from labor pains. Nevertheless, we are beholden to her for one of the best eyewitness accounts of an alien landing on earth ever to come down to us through folklore, and although, in her loneliness, she ended up by identifying herself with the princess, whom she quite naturally assumed to have been in the tower, and changed quite a number of other details around to conform to her wish-fulfillment reverie, we cannot deny that her description of the STPPTSCV is but

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little short of photographic: ". . . a tower, which lay in a forest, and had neither stairs nor door, but quite at the top was a little window." As for the password which Anaxel used to activate the sonic mechanism of the boarding cable, that has come down to us verbatim. Neither *Frau* Schnabel nor the innumerable folk who co-operated in the historical handing-down process during successive generations would have dreamed of changing it. And quite probably it was the factor that affected *Frau* Schnabel's perspective the most, for the words that it comprised had phonetic counterparts in her own language—words that gave the incident a flavor which it would otherwise have lacked. They are well-known words today, and all of us, in our childhood, have run across them in one language or another. In English, they read quite simply,

Rapunzel, Rapunzel,
Let down thy hair to me.

THE END

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, JULY 2, 1946 AND JUNE 11, 1960 (74 STAT. 208) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF FANTASTIC, STORIES OF IMAGINATION published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1962.

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Sworn to and subscribed before me this 19th day of September, 1962

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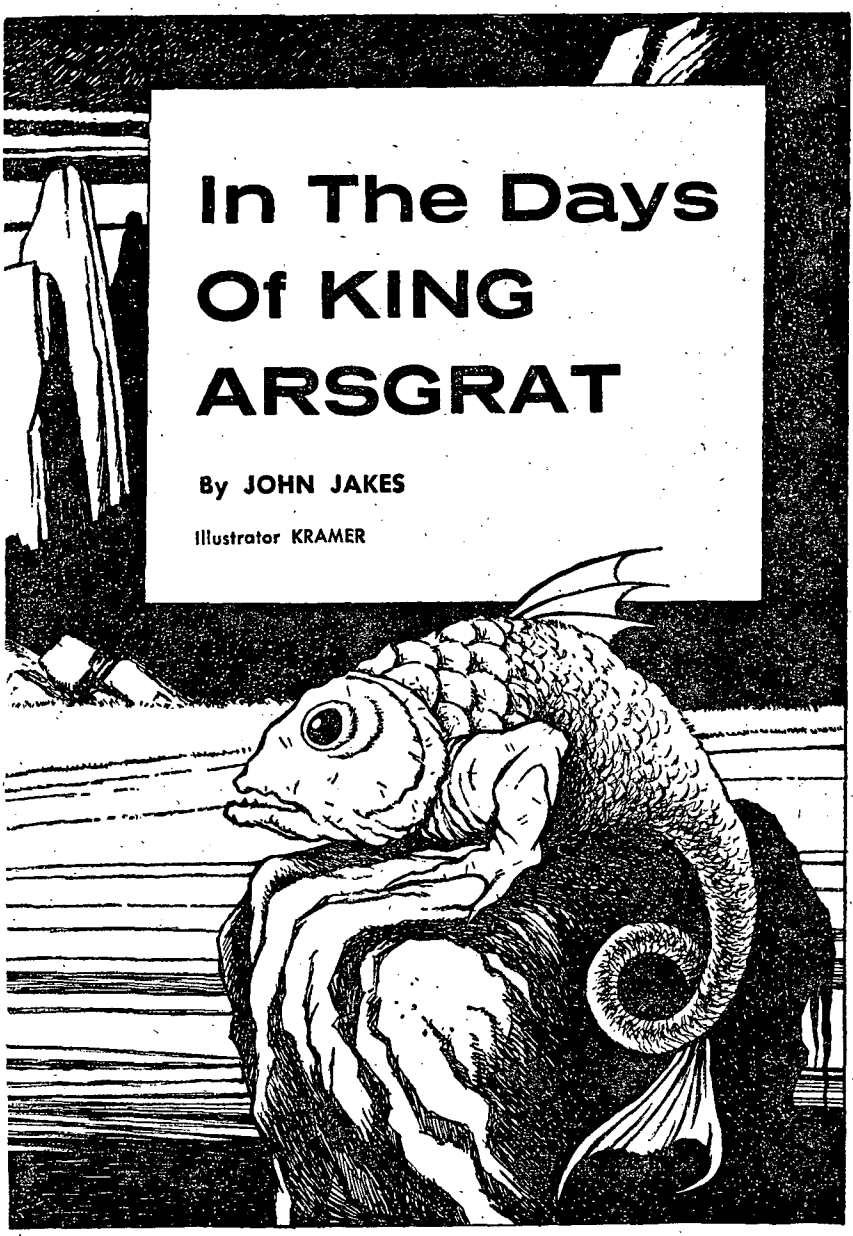

In The Days Of KING ARSGRAT

By JOHN JAKES

Illustrator KRAMER

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There were ancient prophecies.

But it took a wild boy to walk the trembling earth to prove or disprove their reality.

SOMETIME around one-hundred forty-one Anno Lumen, on a day whose name none knew, in a month whose calling was past all remembering, the wild boy appeared out of the bay's gray fog.

He beached his burned, scooped log while the people straggled down the shingle to meet him. They were partly curious and partly afraid. Some whispered that here, at last, was a living emissary from the domains of the awful Arsgrat.

But no. He knew their tongue. He said he was simply a wild boy. He vaguely remembered a man and a woman caring for him, long ago. They had taught him speech before they died. The much longer time, in which he was alone, was clearer in his memory. On the other side of the bay he had heard voices drifting many nights. Goaded by loneliness, he had travelled to find the source of the sounds.

Being a compassionate people, with withered men and women among them who told vividly gruesome tales of the day before the misery began—the day their grandsires saw the Flash—they held council under the leadership of the manager, Genmot.

Why should they fear? Genmot argued. Hadn't the wild boy scratched his bald head and pointed out (with a tongue wiser ones immediately characterized as too sharp and saucy) that the lands of King Arsgrat, of whom they told the boy in whispers, lay to the southward? While the bay the lad had crossed spread out north of the peninsula?

Naturally some protested that mighty Arsgrat moved in devious ways, his miracles to perform, and thus they could be none too careful. But Genmot prevailed, especially after he agreed to welcome the wild boy into his own hut.

In these dangerous, frightening times, every hand was a welcome hand. The number of new children born each year was small. This was because the loveliest, sturdiest maidens travelled south each warm time to that limbo none of the peninsular people had ever seen—the domain of

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Arsgrat. The strong maidens never returned to bear laborers. So the wild boy, two hands and spare frame and totally hairless skull (a favorable sign; he was like the rest of the men) was welcomed. He was no more than eleven or twelve years, but he would grow soon to a worker and a warrior.

THE boy said he did not know his own name, or even whether he had one, since he'd lived apart after the man and woman died. At the suggestion of Genmot he was christened Stanbrans on the spot. Genmot offered Stanbrans since there was currently no man among the two hundred or so dwelling on the peninsular hills who bore that ancient, respected name.

Hearing, the wild boy smiled and said under his breath, "What a funny, silly name."

Later there were those eavesdroppers who embellished the incident. They maintained that when the boy made his remark, the peninsula rumbled and moved, from bay shore to coastal shore. This clearly signified the boy was already displaying signs of impudence that displeased the nameless gods the people worshipped, the mightier god King Arsgrat who held far vaster lands in sway southward, and other gods unknown and beyond counting as well. One or the other of these gods periodically shook the peninsula out of, it was said, eagerness to rend the earth apart and reveal the ancient holy handwork buried these numberless years.

In truth the earth never rumbled at all after the wild boy muttered. The water only went on lapping down the foggy, mystical bay whose northern shore hid eternally in wooly grayness. For why would awful Arsgrat, whose face that none had ever seen but was told to be terrible and dagger-toothed beyond belief, deign to show displeasure at the antics of a stripling no higher than two thirds of a man?

And yet the wild boy, with his bright eyes and his gaudy clout of magenta vinyl, did show small signs—the way he threw back his shoulders when he stood, for one—of possessing an unusual amount of spirit.

Still, that manner of aloof arrogance was probably the result of dwelling overlong alone in gullies. In such a gully, he told them, in the deserted, untravelled hills across the bay, the man and the woman had perished while he watched. He recalled it only vaguely. They returned one dusk bearing some plants that gave off a bluish halation. First the man nibbled, then the woman. The wild boy had not eaten, because the man and the woman soon rolled onto

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their backs, lips coated with a spewing white lather.

In the gullies many similar plants grew. The wild boy had never touched them, subsisting on other roots. In another gully he had found the scrap of magenta vinyl for his clout. In a third, the burned, scooped log.

Now he was glad, he said, to have a name, even such a name as Stanbrans. The name, they informed him after he asked, was highly majestic and significant. However, none knew the significance.

* * *

The years passed around, two and then two more. All were celebrated with the ancient rites, of which the most sacred was the pilgrimage of the youngest and fairest maids to the nowhere of King Arsgrat. And only then did the wild boy Stanbrans become a plague to the people of the peninsula.

He plagued, and he stirred old fears that one god or another would rock the earth and its pitiful stunted covering of growth that fed them.

Rock it not to reveal the holy handwork but to destroy, in righteous anger.

II

NEAR the end of one-hundred forty-five Anno Lumen, Stanbrans received the pointed stick of manhood from manager Genmot, in whose hut he dwelled along with Genmot's barren, kindly wife Dacra. Stanbrans was now allowed to join the journey east in search of the evil Green Crabs.

With the women and children to see them off, the men trooped down to the beach one foggy morning. Nervously, each man clutched his pointed stick. They formed a circle. Into its center stepped old, spindly, rag-loined ThreeM, the headshrinker.

He unwrapped from a cloth the peninsula's sole yellowing copy of the sacred writings, the Sperhutuch. Stanbrans found himself smiling a little. He didn't know why.

Old ThreeM riffled the frayed pages. He mumbled aloud:

"Show us many Green Crabs, o god whose name we do not know. Preserve us from the terrible wrath of Arsgrat and make us mighty in battle and return us safe to our blessed security. We beseech you further—"

Stanbrans nudged his neighbor in the circle, the boy PanG who was his closest, if not his only, friend.

"Are the Green Crabs so terrible we all have to quake with fear?"

PanG was a stocky, bald youth, one year Stanbrans' senior. He replied in a whisper: "Don't mock things you don't

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understand, or know anything about."

"I mock them just because I don't know anything about them," said Stanbrans, hissing through his teeth. "Otherwise, if I understood them, I might shake like the rest."

ThreeM directed a withering glance at the pair. PanG's father Texins, a huge, stooping lout, reached across to box his son's ear. Several women clucked disapprovingly, but at the boys, not the father. PanG turned dull red.

Sanbrans felt rather sorry for his friend. PanG's father was, in his estimation, a dumb fool. The son had inherited much of Texins' clumsiness and unquestioning faith. On the other hand, there lay buried within PanG some maverick streak of curiosity or hellishness that made him about the only youth on the peninsula who admired Stanbrans and did not jibe at him as a queer foreigner.

Sometimes Stanbrans wondered why he bothered to think his odd, unaccepting ideas; why he thought and spoke often in derision of the old, invisible gods. To show off before PanG?

Yes, partly.

To show off before—her?

Ah, definitely.

He glanced from the corner of an eye. She was watching, there among the women.

Then he felt sad. He knew that even if none had fearfully admired his youthful cheek, he still would have suspected all the mumbojumbo. Doubtless his years alone in the gullies across the bay, years of digging roots that looked safe, of trapping what little game there was by painful trial and error, of wishing for the sound of another voice until he cried, had made him different. Put a kink in his head, so to speak.

THREEM was ending the litany:

"—and may the Green Crabs wither, no longer harrying us with their numberless tentacles, as it was told to us that it says here in the holy Sperhutuch."

Yes, told, Stanbrans reminded himself. ThreeM and the rest couldn't decipher the squiggles. Of course neither could he. Reluctantly, following ThreeM's pantomime, he joined the ritual, jabbing his pointed stick in the rusty earth in unison with the other men. Jab, jab, jab.

Stanbrans dug the stick's point deep while dancing around it, as the others were doing. They all gnashed their teeth to simulate battle rage. ThreeM folded away the Sperhutuch in its cloth. The men rushed shouting to the hollowed logs. They would paddle eastward, to a shore glimmering through the fog.

Stanbrans' place was in the

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leading dugout, behind Genmot and ahead of PanG and Texins. As he scrambled from the water to his seat he swung his head slightly, smiling for her.

The quick smile the girl gave him in return, quick so her elders would not see, stirred his heart the way his growing body was sometimes stirred lately in the night. The girl was tall and limber. Her sweet, slim breasts and hips were folded round with a limp and faded mantle of naugahyde. Her hair shone yellow in the glint of the sun's disc that hung, reddish and clearly defined, behind the dusty fog.

She was a year his junior. Her name was Borgana. She was the only sister of his friend PanG. How the hulking Texins and his thick-legged wife Revla had produced such a lovely person, Stanbrans couldn't imagine. But he knew, with a kind of doomed futility, that he was in love with her.

PanG had informed him many times that one of the warm times, Borgana would go to Arsgrat. Why, nobody knew. She must go, that was all. So must the other maids. Stanbrans always grew tight in the chest at the thought of the awful, unseen god who was more powerful than all the others. Hate was the tightness, he supposed.

When Borgana actually left, taken from him for a reason no one could fathom, he knew his life would be jerked awry. He would protest. He might even do violence.

That crisis was not yet at hand, however. Today sought the Green Crabs in the east.

STICK paddles flashed in the dulled sun as twenty hollowed logs slid away from land. Behind rose the ritual lamentations of the women. Old ThreeM waved the cloth-covered Sperhutuch back and forth in blessing.

Stanbrans bit his paddle into the water, pulled hard. The far shore, burnt and grassless hills tumbled one beside another, slid closer. Soon the leading log skimmed around to a place in the bay from which Genmot could point out a mighty half-seen something, an immense reddish-brown log that was not wood. It wavered upright beneath the water, its bottom far out of sight.

"There is the first of the monuments, my son," Genmot said over his sunbaked shoulder. "On a clear night you can see them shining."

The boy was curious. "I have never looked, father. Is there more than one?"

"Many, all under the water, from our shore to that. Each is a monument. They say one of the mightiest of the old gods is buried somewhere down there. His

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name was Caen. Why he required so many monuments is a mystery."

"The old gods seem full of nothing but mysteries," Stanbrans said.

From the stern of the log Texins reached his paddle across his son's shoulder, then over that of Stanbrans, to tap Genmot. The manager looked around.

"Genmot, this adopted son of yours has developed a nasty tongue."

"It is because he lived wild," Genmot said gently, paddling hard again. "Don't chastise him too much. He has brought my wife and me many comforts, especially since I am manager and the manager's task is not a light one. He'll come to understand, the older he grows."

"Let's hope so," Texins grumbled. Stanbrans said:

"Father, I don't mean to cause you misery with questions. You and my mother have been very kind to me. Given me the warmness of people that drove me to cross the bay in the first place. But there are many things I don't know about. Such as, what is a manager? I've always wanted to ask, but—"

Shocked, PanG said, "Everyone knows that."

"I don't know it," retorted Stanbrans. "Why is it such a special thing, always said in such a special voice?"

PanG shuddered. "Don't blaspheme."

"And bring down the wrath of Arsgrat to boot," said Texins, with a glance at the sky.

BE patient with him," Genmot said, although he was plainly troubled himself. He licked his sere old lips. "A manager—he—well, he manages, my son, that is all. The man who is leader of all the others, manages. That is a very good thing, but don't ask me why."

Stanbrans' brow quirked. "All right, father. Can you tell me why we must fight Green Crabs?"

"Because," cried Texins, "the Green Crabs are a pestilence and our enemies, idiot!"

"Let him be!" Genmot said sharply. "Stanbrans, many things are difficult for me to explain. The Green Crabs are. They have been enemies beyond memory, as they were enemies of the gods who lived before the Flash. Therefore we hunt them, to destroy them."

"How do you know they were enemies of the old gods?" Stanbrans asked at once.

"My father told me." Genmot spoke with a flat assurance, as if it settled matters.

Stanbrans sighed. "That always seems to be the answer to everything."

Poor PanG was too awed by his

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father's presence to do more than flush on his friend's behalf. To PanG's chagrin, Texins applied the paddle suddenly again, this time in a light whack against Stanbrans' burnt-brown shoulders.

"Listen, boy! Your father may coddle your viper tongue, but don't let me catch it stirring up the air around my hut. I've seen you making moon eyes at Borgana."

Genmot chuckled tolerantly. Texins didn't think it was at all funny. He rushed on: "—and I'll not have her joining the other maids next year to trek to Arsgrat with a polluted mind."

The hollow log glided through the water, the other logs slipping along behind. The men breathed hard at their paddles. A fish with three eyes swam past the bows, iridescent-finned. Stanbrans was cold head to foot.

"Next year?" he said. "Will Borgana be going then?"

"I told you so once, Stanbrans," PanG hissed. "She's blossomed out."

"I didn't believe you. I thought going to Arsgrat was a tale for punishing toddlers."

"No tale, my son," Genmot said. He spoke with a decisiveness that indicated Stanbrans was pressing too hard. "Each year, in the warmest time, the fairest go to Arsgrat. Why, none can say, except that it was so in the time of the old gods who worked wonders and manufactured miracles, and the tradition has come down to us. They must go. They must offer their bodies in the kingdom of King Arsgrat."

"To do what?" Stanbrans cried. "To die? To vanish? That's certainly a silly, stupid custom if—"

"Enough!"

From Genmot's tone and face, Stanbrans knew he ought to be quiet. Inwardly, though, he was seething.

Who was this King Arsgrat of whom they were all so terrified? Oh yes, he'd heard it before—the awfullest of the awful gods. But who were they, anyway?

NONE ever saw any of the holy handwork, except for the bright, meaningless (and probably faked) images on display in the tattered leaves of the Sperhutuch. Stanbrans experienced a sense of rebellion; of danger racing to meet him.

He knew Borgana loved him. He knew it even though they had not spoken a word on the subject. Unfortunately, though, it wasn't a question of wanting or not wanting to go to Arsgrat. Borgana wanted to go. She didn't know why she wanted to go. But according to PanG, the maidens always wanted to go, despite the fact that they knew absolutely

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nothing about what lay in wait for them there. "My father said so." That was the excuse. Nonsense!

Or had he dwelled too long alone? Was he the victim of a crooked mind?

Now and again he did admit privately that there was something ringing and splendid in the great god's name.

Arsgrat. King Arsgrat.

Pfaugh. He felt that way only because most other gods were nameless.

For a moment he regretted his questioning, his refusal to accept what Genmot believed in simple good faith. Genmot and Dacra his wife were kindly people. They had treated him marvellously well. Briefly, he wished with all his heart that he could believe comfortably and placidly in their gods.

Then an image of Borgana's soft gray eyes returned to haunt his inner eyes. Probably next year she would go—

Then next year he, Stanbrans, would not let her go. Would fight. Would—yes—die.

In this gloomy frame of mind he raised his head in response to Genmot's sudden excited halloo. The hollowed logs had glided beyond the last of the upright underwater monuments and were skimming near the tumbled brown hills on shore. The men beached and dragged up the logs. Pointed sticks held fast in half a hundred hands, single file and Genmot leading, the men tramped up the first hillside.

The men were utterly silent, squinting their eyes for first signs of the loathsome Green Crabs.

"GO away and go away!" screamed PanG. "Die and die!" he shrieked, dancing up and down.

"Die and die!" the others were shouting. "Go away and go away!"

Genmot's voice was loudest, a furious bellow of rage. His powerful brown arm arced up, then down, skewering the point of his stick into the heart of one of the evil Green Crabs. Dust rose in clouds from the repeated attacking of the earth. The dust tasted hot and gritty yellow in Sanbrans' mouth. He stood with his own stick heavy in his hand, motionless.

Angrily Texins clapped him on the back.

"Get in the swing of it, boy! Kill them! Kill!"

"Those?" Stanbrans cried back in the pandemonium. "Those things? They're not worth—"

"Die and die!" twenty men shouted together, drowning him out.

They danced up and down, smashing the Green Crabs with

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their bare feet. Their bodies were burnished by dust and sun and cast flickering shadows over the small valley. All chanted the battle song—"Go away and go away, Green Crabs!"—with a maniacal frenzy. In the midst of the leaping, plunging, stabbing shapes, Stanbrans alone remained frozen. He was overwhelmed by a sense of ludicrous loss; of being cheated.

PanG whirled by, a chunk of a Green Crab's body impaled on his stick.

"Die and die!" PanG screamed, giving the stick a snap with his wrist. The Green Crab's remains flew off and struck Stanbrans in the face.

Dirt tickled Stanbrans' cheek and neck. The touch of the Green Crab was faintly hairy, but certainly there was nothing about the creatures, so far as he could see, to foment the orgy of rage now in progress. Stanbrans hunkered down for a closer look.

The Crab was a clump of green shafts, most of which were no longer than his longest finger. The shafts radiated from a core of dirt and roots which PanG had pried from the earth. Nearest this core the shafts modulated from a furred green hue to a deep, practically purplish red. With a laugh Stanbrans reached out to pick up the dead thing.

A shadow fell between his hands. Genmot lashed his son's back with his stick and shouted, "Do not!"

Stanbrans glanced up. The laugh rising in his mouth was trapped there by the sight of his father.

Wrapped in the textured naugahyde clout of the manager, Genmot was the picture of warlike anger. His brown chest ran with trickles of sweat. His eyes were startled and round. He brandished the pointed stick.

"I will not abide this, Stanbrans. The Green Crab is your enemy, not a thing to be petted. Do not touch it. Otherwise you may be infected by its creeping poison."

Stanbrans stood up, unable to stifle a cluck of disbelief. "Father, it's a growing thing. It's nothing but a green, growing thing. It holds tight in the earth and—"

Whack, the pointed stick lashed his cheek and drew blood.

Genmot fairly screamed: "I have suffered enough insolence! It is a monstrous evil creature in the guise of a growing thing. It feeds on itself. It devours all life. Do not touch it! Kill it so it will die and die!"

AND with that, Genmot attacked the uprooted Crab anew. He struck and poked it furiously, rending apart the core of earth and roots. All around, the other men were doing the same—

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When the men first crept over the brow of the low hillock, discovering the small valley, an eerie, terrified sigh escaped from nearly every mouth. Stanbrans had then seen his first Green Crabs. Hundreds of them clutched the earth on the floor of the small valley. They didn't look very sinister then and they looked less sinister now. Nearly every last crab was uprooted. They rested on their backs, tangled browning balls of roots and dirty exposed to the sinking sun.

Genmot shoved his boy.

"Kill one, Stanbrans! Find a Green Crab and kill it or you're *no son of mine!*"

A retort spewed to Stanbrans' lips. It never came out. Genmot's eyes were glazed. His torso was drenched with new streams of sweat. Nearby, Texins was beating a Green Crab to death with the butt of his stick and frothing at the mouth.

Wearily Stanbrans trudged off, selected one of the pitiful uprooted things and began to jab its scarlet-radiating shafts.

"Go away and go away," he muttered.

"Louder, son!" Genmot called joyously.

"Go away and go away. Die and die."

"Die and die!" Genmot exulted. He was smiling now, leaping in to aid his son, striking hard, and hard again—

EXHAUSTED, the men slunk back over the hills at nightfall.

They huddled together on the beach. They built a fire alongside the hollowed logs, chewed roots and talked of the momentous victory. A sickle moon floated behind the fog. The chain of underwater monuments gave off a bluish halation that shivered as the water rippled above.

Stanbrans sat by himself. He was bitterly aware that he'd committed a grave error today. Even PanG, teeth shining as he rested next to Texins and helped recount the battle, had not spoken so much as a word to his friend since leaving the small valley. Even during the frenzy of the struggle, many had evidently seen the way Stanbrans derided the warfare by refusing to participate wholeheartedly.

A hand settled lightly on his shoulder. Against the blowing fog and the high, wan sickle moon stood Genmot.

His clout flapped in the damp breeze. He was no longer in the highly excited state in which he'd struck Stanbrans. But his face was sterner than the boy had ever known it to be.

Genmot made no reference to the grime-crusted wound laid open on his son's cheek. He said tersely: "When we paddle back, something must be done about you, boy. I feel it is my responsi-

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bility not only because you are my adopted son but because I am the manager. I cannot allow you to invite our destruction. I will send you to talk to ThreeM. Otherwise, you understand—"

Genmot shrugged, suddenly sad. He turned away and walked toward the laughing, boasting men. Stanbrans continued to sit alone on the moonlit shingle, legs tucked beneath his chin while he sorrowfully contemplated the clear threat in Genmot's word, "Otherwise—"

Otherwise loneliness. Otherwise a turning out. Otherwise being friendless, and alone again forever.

He would see ThreeM without argument.

THE hut of the headshrinker lay on the far slope of the highest hillside on the peninsula. It had been located there because it was thought that ThreeM, communing as he did with the dark and generally nameless forces which ruled the world, might better do so alone, in privacy. On the night of the men's return from battle, Stanbrans walked to the crest of the hill accompanied by Genmot.

His father's anger had moderated somewhat during the trip back. But a trace still remained in his voice as he said:

"Today I petitioned ThreeM to speak with you. At first he refused, maintaining King Arsgrat might be angered because you were once a wild boy. I was forced to talk loudly and remind him that it is I, the manager, who am preeminent, even though publicly the people place more store in what ThreeM knows of the powers who rule the world. Thus it was before the Flash, and thus it remains. And that," he added with a wry smile, "is one more thing my father taught me."

He rumpled Stanbrans' hair, slapped his backside. "Hurry now. Don't mock ThreeM. Listen respectfuly and attentively. Try to believe. The loneliness of refusing can't be such a fine thing, else you wouldn't be here with us. And here is where your mother Dacra and I want you to remain, my son."

The little speech was delivered with such infinite gentleness toward the end, and obvious love, that Stanbrans knew Genmot did not intend it as a threat. And yet it was.

A moment longer Stanbrans lingered on the crest from which he could see the first of the monuments to Caen gleaming beneath the bay's water. The night was very clear and the fog had not rolled in from there off the coast. Details were sharp. There was a tormenting symbolism, not lost on him, in the sight of his father climbing down the dusty

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slope to the cluster of cook fires around the huts while he, Stanbrans, was left by himself to travel the opposite way bearing the burden of his own doubt.

Resolutely, he hitched up his clout and started down.

ThreeM's eyes, large and old and yellowing, floated in the murky dark under the wall of his isolated hut. A bird with four claws went flapping across the sky. ThreeM paid no attention. In the cleft of his clouted lap rested the bundle of rags containing the Sperhutuch. The old man lifted a shaking finger, pointed. Stanbrans sat down, tense.

WITH a reedy and petulant insistence old ThreeM began: "Stanbrans, you doubt the gods."

"I doubt them only because I've never seen them," the boy replied frankly.

"To be one spine among many sweet blooms is a sorrowful and hurting thing. For the spine," ThreeM chided.

"So far I haven't seen any sweet blooms either."

Instantly Stanbrans regretted the answer. He noted the stiffening of ThreeM's bony shoulders, so he made up his mind to speak in a more moderate tone of voice, prompted by memories of the tolerance and patience with which Genmot had treated him even in the first long-ago days when he was clumsy, unfamiliar with the work of tilling the root fields. He said:

"I want to believe in the gods, headshrinker." That was a half truth, but he pressed on. "I do not wish to stir trouble. Or bring my father and mother heartache. It is just that there are many things that I don't understand. Such as, who is Arsgrat?"

ThreeM said quickly, to correct him: "King Arsgrat. The mightiest. The awfullest."

"A god? From the way everyone talks he must be alive. I thought the gods were all dead."

"They are not dead while we remember them. And see their holy handwork."

"But I have never seen any, ThreeM. I think it might help me to believe if I saw some."

Carefully the old man unfolded the cloths. He brought forth the thin lacquered pages of the Sperhutuch, which he leafed over slowly one at a time, displaying the bright images to the boy. All of them meant nothing to Stanbrans, being collections of odd wand shapes that shone silvery, weird artifacts crafted from unfamiliar materials. On the final pages, however, were a number of human—nearly—figures wearing strange bundles of clouts all over their bodies.

"These were gods," ThreeM informed him. "You can tell by

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the hair on the men ones. The other things you saw were their wonders. The gods were mighty and glorious. They all flew away after the Flash. Thus it is told father unto father. Thus it is now and shall be always. They were like us in form, yet not like us in the magnitude of their miracles, which are described, so it is said, here."

A crabbed finger crawled from the images of the many-clouted gods to the strange black squiggles below.

"To believe in the gods, Stanbrans, is to be redeemed from loneliness. That is why, so said my father who was headshrinker before me, this great book of Sperhutuch, showing the gods' wonders, was kept in a lost shrine whose name was the Redemption Center."

THE words had a thrilling lilt. Stanbrans' backbone prickled in the damp night air. Truly, the jumbled, meaningless images, all shining despite their age, had a certain fathomless air of majesty.

As soon as he thought that, he was nagged by renewed doubt. The god called green growing things mortal enemies. He asked:

"ThreeM, were the Green Crabs actually the great foes of the gods?"

"That is so. The gods waged perpetual battle against them. Now losing, now winning. Wealth untold they brought to the conflict. Still the dread things returned and spawned. Thus it is even today."

Stanbrans wanted to launch an argument about the foolishness of warring against the small hairy green clumps. He refrained, torn by the dual tugs—what he believed as against the sobbing loneliness of living apart. He must understand. At least he must make the effort to understand. He said:

"My friend PanG told me you had seen some of the holy handwork of the gods."

"Once, once," ThreeM nodded dreamily. "As a child. The earth hereabouts rumbled and ruptured."

The boy was quickly anxious: "What did you see?"

"Many buried miracles I did not understand." Then, with a slight sadness: "But never the greatest miracle of all. The miracle even I, in my deep faith, find nigh unbelievable." His old face became beatific. "The gods made snow, Stanbrans. Long ago before the Flash—so it has been told—the gods made snow."

Upon several occasions Stanbrans had heard the curious word, whispered in awe. He asked ThreeM about the nature of snow. The old man's gapped mouth opened with wonder:

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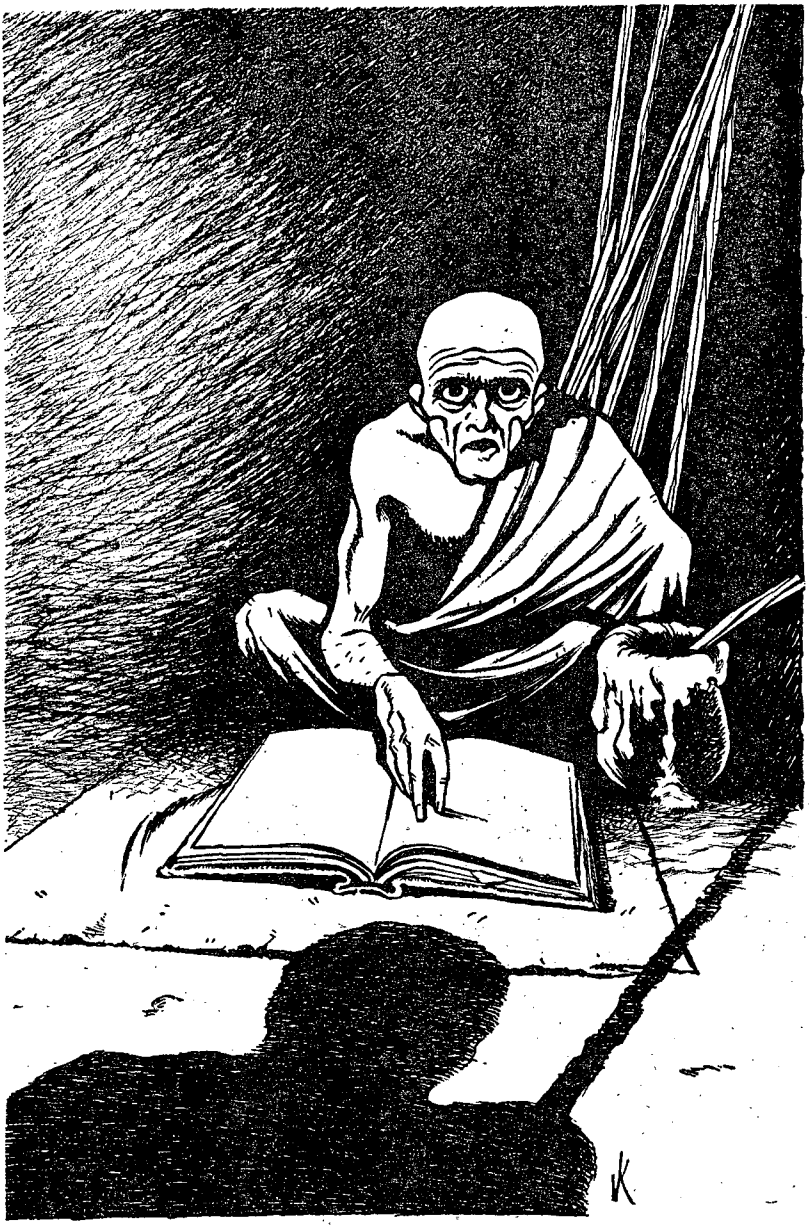

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"I do not know for certain. In that day of my childhood, when the earth opened but before it closed again, I dreamed of seeing it. Now, damp nights, I dream of it still. Lovely white and brightly shining. Dancing in motes, sparkling and stirring. Whiter than the fog, Stanbrans. Oh, far whiter."

He was lost in memory now, old eyes peering beyond the blue monuments out there under water, bald head nodding and nodding.

"The loveliest of stuff, Stanbrans. A miracle of the gods' creation. There was one man on the peninsula, that time I was a child, who dared to enter the strange boxes showed us when the earth rumbled and moved. Though I don't know how he proposed to do it, he maintained that he could work the magic of the gods and bring snow out of the many strange things the rest of us merely glimpsed far below, standing as we were, frightened, at the new pit's edge. The earth shook and closed, crushing him to death while he descended. Stanbrans, I still have hope that before I die, the earth will open once more and I will see snow. My father who, as I believe I mentioned, had much eminence as an oracle, told me the holy handwork of the gods is there, far down under us as we sit, awaiting only a touch to spring to life. The handwork was covered over at the Flash. But of course," he added sadly, "it may be nothing but an idle dream. Oh, not the handwork. The loveliness of snow. Perhaps snow does not exist down there at all."

CLOSING his eyes, Stanbrans thought of snow. PanG had also described it to him once, fearfully. A white, many-spotted, drifting miracle. Ah, to see snow! Then he might begin to believe. Then his heart and the heart of his father might truly turn to each other.

But, like ThreeM, he doubted snow's existence. He said:

"ThreeM, if King Arsgrat is a god, the awfullest of the awful, could he make snow?"

"That is hard to say. I do not know what King Arsgrat is. Only where." He gestured south. "I doubt he could make snow. He is terrible, not soft. He speaks with a roar of thunder. My father often related—" ThreeM paused for a long, shuddering breath. He threw back his head. His voice changed. Stanbrans sensed he was reciting:

"In the beginning was the Flash. The blue dust was upon the face of the deep. On the first all clear day Arsgrat created Editor Marshal. On the second all clear day Arsgrat created Needle Woman Joana Cream. On the third all clear day Arsgrat creat-

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ed their children who—who—"

Stanbrans leaned forward. A spit bubble formed on ThreeM's lips, gleamed in the night, burst. The old man's head dropped perceptibly, into a deep doze.

After a hopeful wait Stanbrans rose. ThreeM had definitely fallen asleep. The boy trudged with reluctance up the hill and down again.

What had he learned? Next to nothing. He was still wracked by doubt. Who had birthed him, to infect him thus? Who was that wild man, that wild woman he remembered as foggy images? Were they responsible?

He would believe in snow if he saw it, the pristine whiteness of it PanG had conjured once with simple words. The white radiance of it would be a genuine miracle on these damp fog-rolled brown hills.

But the remainder—yes, even the might of Arsgrat—was beyond belief. And, Stanbrans thought, remembering the Green Crabs, silly besides.

He put a brave show for Genmot, however. His father was waiting at the hut entrance:

"Did ThreeM dispel your doubts, my son?" The manager's tone of hope was heartbreaking.

"He taught me many interesting things," answered Stanbrans with care. "He is a wise man."

"No doubt he fell asleep on you at the end," Genmot chuckled. He placed an arm across his tall son's shoulders. "That is why he is headshrinker and I am manager. I am awake at all critical times. Nevertheless, he is full of wisdom, as you say. Did he tell you—?"

"Many things," Stanbrans repeated hastily, eager for the talk to stay brief and noncommittal. "I will keep silent in the future, father."

"That's very good, my son. The gods demand respect."

Yes, the boy said to himself. They made the snow. Or did they, since I'll never see it?

Stanbrans followed his father into the hut. He lay down to sleep, his face to the wall.

ThreeM had convinced him of nothing. He thought about this through the long night while Genmot and Dacra snored softly, arms entwined as they took ease on their sleeping cloths.

He remained the outsider and there was indeed such a deity—one day he knew the worst would happen.

One day he would be unable to hide his disbelief, as he hid it for the sake of Genmot tonight.

III

EARLY in one-hundred forty-six Anno Lumen, the test came.

Never again had Stanbrans returned to the hut of ThreeM. He

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submerged his doubts, his wild derision of the silly gods, beneath a mask of loyalty he wore for the sake of Genmot the manager. He tilled the root fields and participated in a second expedition across the water, howling and leaping over the Green Crabs with a perspiring fury that brought smiles to the faces of his friend PanG and his father Genmot, and even a tolerant smirk to the oafish mouth of Texins. In truth Stanbrans had little time to fret about the gods. He was possessed in every waking instant by the ripening feelings the girl Borgana roused in his body and head.

Together they roamed the peninsula at every opportunity. Stanbrans never touched her physically. Their conversations were frivolous, on topics no more demanding than the state of the root crop or the meaningless oddity of the multiclawed birds who flapped in the heavens. Love arrived nevertheless, the way it was meant to arrive among the peninsular people:

One day Stanbrans and Borgana were wandering through a dry gully. Stanbrans spied a litter of gleaming pebbles. Borgana spied them also. But she averted her eyes with all due modesty.

Over the top of the gully wall drifted voices of the men and women sitting down to talk. During work they always sat down to talk for an extended period before the sun reached zenith. Why they ceased work at this time, as they also did once again later in the day, was another thing neither Stanbrans or anyone else understood. My father told me.

Borgana scuffed her sweetly bare foot in the dust while Stanbrans eyed the pebbles.

Did he dare make the overture? Borgana had so many suitors. And while Texins had moderated his stand on Stanbrans' lingering around the hut, because Stanbrans was behaving in a more seemly way of late, not ranting wildly about the silly gods, Stanbrans wasn't sure Texins would take kindly to him becoming the one Borgana favored above others.

Well, what had he to lose? Not very much.

"Those rocks," he blurted. He was startled by the shrillness of his voice. "We could—"

He was stupefied by Borgana's sudden turn, the whip of her yellow hair in the damp morning air. Those lovely locks were all the more thrilling because male heads bore nothing but skin. Stanbrans was speechless. Minxish, Borgana came to his rescue:

"Did you wish to say something about the pebbles, Stanbrans?"

He spoke in a strangled way: "There seem to be enough. We could—could—"

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"You crazy boy," she said, with a smiling sadness he didn't understand. "Go on."

"I could arrange. We could sit down. We might. Oh, this is hopeless."

BORGANA moved nearer. Her sweet young breasts made his heart ache, thrusting so gently beneath her naugahyde mantle. A teasing light fired her gray eyes. She twisted the mantle's hem, this way, that way, no more and no less coy than any other peninsular girl at courting time.

Stanbrans slowly turned purple. He was wholly unfamiliar with the demands of the situation. Taking pity on him, Borgana came quite close to reaching out involuntarily to sting him alive with a touch. She drew her hand back in time, as was proper, and instead said:

"PanG has been predicting for days you would ask me. I've turned down many others."

"Then how can I possibly hope you'll say yes?"

Borgana was eternally feminine: "Ask me, Stanbrans. See."

He was still incapable of framing a whole sentence. He waved at the pebbles. "The. Uh. Game."

"Yes, Stanbrans," she said lightly. "I'll play the Game with you."

Panicky relief swept him. He wanted to whoop and shout. He gathered pebbles as Borgana seated herself decorously in the shade of the gully wall.

Stanbrans knelt, conscious that his hands were shaking. Though he had been introduced to it only a short time ago, relatively speaking, by means of the whispers and leers of PanG and other youths, Stanbrans was rapturously aware of the Game's significance. When a girl played the Game with a lad, they were agreed to be as one, sometime later.

Spilling pebbles again and again, Stanbrans managed to count out four piles. There were two hand's worth and three more per pile. He arranged the piles in the dust to form a rough square.

Borgana knelt on one side of the square, Stanbrans on the other. They looked at the pebbles when they really wanted to look at one another. After a suitable interval Stanbrans pronounced the magic, impossibly wondrous word:

"Rubber."

It meant so much while meaning nothing. It meant Borgana was his. Would be his forever. Would share his hut and play the Game over and over until they grew old and their bald sons and hairy daughters grew to—

Sick memory flooded him. He heaped all the pebbles into a single pile and counted them out again in the same arrangement. He and Borgana changed places,

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going to new but still opposite sides of the square.

There would be no bald sons, nor any hairy daughters. She was among the fairest. She would go to Arsgrat.

Tears welled in his eyes. He fought them back and exchanged shy smiles with her. Were there tears in the corners of her gray eyes also?

THE Game somehow became infinitely sweeter as they played it out through two more repetitions of the talismanic word. Then, silently, they stood up together. They scattered the pebbles and climbed the gully wall to the root field to begin work one more, both still gripped by the spell of the act.

Moving down among the rows of men to grasp his raking sticks, Stanbrans tasted hot gall of rebellion. He loved her, and she loved him. Why must she go away?

Before sunset and the onset of the rolling fog, he thought he felt the earth tremble beneath his feet. He glanced up, cold with alarm. Borgana managed a sidewise grin, toiling at a distance with the women. Stanbrans looked around. The others labored vigorously at their tasks. The earth had not rumbled.

To admit it had, he realized, he would also need to admit the gods lived. They did not, notwithstanding their silly legacies of Green Crabs and the Game. He could not believe in them because he had seen nothing thus far in which belief was worthwhile. Not even the Game.

He recognized the Game's dull, purposeless ritual as just that, able at the same time to relish it for what it allowed him to say to the slim, sweet girl he loved.

To direct his mind to lighter things, he sought out PanG after the labor was done for the day. They joked and wrestled and ran wild footraces long into the night.

But even as he romped, Stanbrans still kept wondering whether the earth had rumbled and the gods had warned.

SOON enough he learned the delights of the kind of rapture that comes mingled with black sorrow.

One day in the warming part of the year, after labor, Borgana slipped around outside Genmot's hut. She called Stanbrans by name. When he emerged, she led him across a hillside with a mysterious comment that she had something to show him.

The sun was almost sunk out in the water past the coast. Borgana's figure was insubstantial, gliding lightly ahead up the side of the parched hill, then around the crest and down to a sheltered pocket formed by protruding

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crops of yellowish stone. The whole scene was sun-painted an unearthly red. Tears on Borgana's cheeks, two thin rivulets, burned like blood.

Overwhelming dread filled Stanbrans. He walked slowly. Borgana waited for him to join her in the hillside pocket, out of the clamminess of the rolling, blowing fog.

"Stanbrans," she said in a broken voice, "I am afraid to bring you here. Afraid to do this. I must. In six settings and seven risings—" She hesitated.

"To Arsgrat?" He asked in a burst of terrified understanding. "The maids? To Arsgrat?"

Borgana nodded, weeping in a flood as she fell on her knees. Stanbrans turned white.

"Why, Borgana? Why must you go?"

With an impulsive lunge he grasped her arms. He dragged her toward him. Both were in such an overwrought state neither was conscious of the lewdly bold act he'd committed by laying hands on her.

The wild boy's face cast into savage lines. He spat out over and over:

"Why? Why? Why?"

"I—can't say," the girl sobbed. "It—is done. The gods—once a year at the warmest time—sent the fairest. Or perhaps the maids went—themselves, as some tell, with none to order them. Offerings to—the mightiest, Arsgrat. I love you, Stanbrans, but—" She raised a face lit by dying scarlet, a tormented thing to behold. "—but I have lived on the peninsula always. I fear Arsgrat terribly. Some things are too strong and familiar—like the wind, and women having hair—for me to ever get them out of myself. Even if the earth shook and swallowed me. Even—for a lover."

"To demand you—" Stanbrans choked. "Arsgrat is an evil god. A false god. They sneer at me for not believing. Is Arsgrat worth my faith? All the stupid rest are —were—bad enough, but Arsgrat is the foullest of the pack if he—"

Shuddering, Borgana stopped his lips with her hand.

"Stanbrans, there's no choice. Let me do the one thing I brought you here to do, terrible and sinful as it is. I am not strong enough to do the other. To run from Arsgrat."

THE wild boy waited, wondering. Her hands dipped behind a large rock. He gasped.

She held a good-sized, thin and dull gray flat rock horizontally on her palms. Upon the rock rested a number of smaller ones. One was purplish, another yellow fired through with orange, a third carnelian, a fourth bluish as the morning. All the rocks had

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been carefully washed. The ones resting on the largest and flattest had been polished until they glistened.

Lovingly Borgana laid the flat rock with its burden of brighter chips on the ground before Stanbrans. Then she bowed her head, in shame as well as happiness, and wept.

"Oh, Borgana," Stanbrans whispered. "Frozdin. Frozdin."

She nodded, leaning against his shoulder suddenly, heedless of the sin. She wailed her love.

Stanbrans found himself stroking her cool, sweet back without shame or fear. He gazed down at the offering glimmering in the sundown red. The Fast of Frozdin was the gods' ritual act signifying the consumation of marriage. Following a public ceremony—never before it, for that would be lustful sin—at which the headshrinker displayed pages of the Sperhutuch, the bride in private with her husband produced, from just such a hidden cranny, a few pebbles chosen with care and burnished to a luster and arranged in a strict pattern. None knew what the pebbles represented. But Frozdin from some cool hiding place was the symbol of the bride's full giving of her time and her talents and her very life to her husband's welfare.

"Borgana, Borgana," he said, stroking her spine, dreading somehow the words he must say. "I won't let them send you with the rest."

"Oh, Stanbrans, it isn't sending. It's wanting. I want to go. I have been taught the rightness of it."

"Taught evil," the wild boy said. There were tears on his own face now. "I'll stop them."

"No, Stanbrans! The men would fall upon you with the pointed sticks. This way—" She controlled her tears, drew back, braved a smile. "—this way at very least, when we all walk the long way to the land of Arsgrat, the others and I, I'll have one thing they won't. The memory of serving the man I would have chosen Frozdin."

As if seeking to touch an untouchable part of him, her hands roamed his face, lightly but tenderly. "Why I love you I can't say. You're not like the rest. You insult the gods. You don't believe in believing. Yet there is a fierceness and strength in you. Stanbrans, hold me a little again. I've committed this much blasphemy. What will more matter?"

Stanbrans gathered her into his arms. He clutched her protectively while the sun simmered down behind the boiling banks of fog. They spoke a great many more words to one another, lover's words which made little sense except to them. Clasping her lithe sweetness tight, Stan-

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brans felt weighed by a nameless fear.

That was wrong. He knew its name well. He was afraid of King Arsgrat.

Afraid he truly existed, somewhere in the limbo, south. Stanbrans grew even more afraid when he realized he might well come face to face with the dreadful ruler. Because—the decision was like a hard, fierce hand blow of defiance across the cheeks of Genmot and the rest—because he had already formed his plan. His daring, wild plan.

AT length Borgana made ready to leave. She was so overcome with emotion she couldn't look at him. They held hands briefly.

"Goodbye, Stanbrans. Even with Arsgrat I'll love you."

Gone, up the hillside on light feet.

Chilly with dread, Stanbrans gathered the polished relics of Frozdin. He tramped back to the hut of Genmot and hid the stones under a cloth. Six settings and seven risings later, he carried them with him to a hillside he reached a roundabout way.

There he sat the morning through, having feigned illness when Genmot and Dacra left the hut for the pomp and ceremony that attended the departure of seven girls. All morning long the monotone chantings of ThreeM carried to him on the breeze. He squeezed his heart free of pain, of every emotion except an overwhelming hate of Arsgrat.

When the people returned to the fields after the maids had gone at the zenith of the sun, he ran to find PanG.

* * *

"Monsters guard his kingdom!" PanG protested shrilly. "Stanbrans, I can't."

"PanG," the wild boy said quietly, "are you my friend or no?"

"If it were a lark, an adventure—or only part way—but to blaspheme! My father—"

"Are you my friend? One way or another, I am going. Are you?"

Miserably, PanG said he was, even though he cursed the day he'd taken up with the likes of Stanbrans. They crept away well after dusk.

Each bore a pointed stick and a small cache of roots in a vinyl pouch. By sunrise they had tramped down the peninsula to the higher coastal lands. There no soul lived except runty deer with six-toed hoofs. They followed the outline of the coast, for the domain of Arsgrat, as all knew, lay on the shore far south. PanG complained incessantly all the first and second days, growing more and more frightened.

On the third day they sighted the party of maidens from an

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eminence. The maidens were wending their way along a dusty track between spindly-treed hillsides whose tops radiated bluish after dark. At once Stanbrans' spirits rose. With Borgana and the other maids in sight, he knew he and PanG would not lose the trail. Nor would PanG be able to draw him off the path with false directions conceived in fright.

ON the tenth day, at sunset, they reached a level stretch of ground near the coast. In the lowering light a vast natural pit stood out black in the sand. PanG hung back:

"The gods tried to reveal themselves here, Stanbrans. The place is haunted."

Stanbrans managed a laugh he didn't feel. He scrambled to the pit's edge. "Shall we see what they tried to reveal?" And before PanG could cry warning, he dropped over the side.

PanG paced back and forth. He gnawed on the solid, opaque, scalish nails of his hand. Finally Stanbrans reappeared. He was covered with sand and trembling. He hurried to the side of his friend. He extended his right hand which held something dark.

"Don't tell me you're not frightened," PanG whined. "Your face is all bleached out."

"Look. I rooted around," Stanbrans whispered. "I think I found a god."

Unfolding his fingers, he revealed a small wood figure crusted with greenish mold. In size it no more than spanned Stanbrans' palm. Male, despite a detail that was grotesquely out of joint. It had youngish features. It had a clout about its midsection. Its right hand was uplifted while its left rested on its naked breast. There were small punctures in each.

Most unusual of all, on its head, an integral part of the carving—and this was the grotesque detail—was a sort of spiky aureole above—unmistakably; and PanG was shuddering—thick hair.

"I am sure this is an image of a god," Stanbrans said. "The hair—"

"Ridiculous," PanG quavered. Then louder: "Ridiculous. The true gods were giants, not little things. The real gods made noise. ThreeM says all the holy handwork in the Sperhutuch gives off loud sound when it works, whatever that means. Arsgrat himself screams like the storm. My father told me."

With another violent shudder, PanG pointed to the thing staring up at them with wood eyes from the center of Stanbrans' fear-dampened palm.

"Throw it away."

The wild boy shook his head. "How can the gods you call gods be worthy gods when Arsgrat is

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one of them, demanding life from Borgana and the others? This is as much a god as they are, I imagine. He has hair. That is strong evidence. I wonder if this god could make snow?" he finished quietly.

"Please throw it away," PanG pleaded. "Nothing so small—"

"Small, small!" Stanbrans mocked. "At least this one isn't crying out for maidens and more maidens like that filthy Arsgrat."

PanG went rigid, in a posture of stricken alarm. Then, as the enormity of his friend's charge penetrated, he gave a wild howl and flung up his stick and bashed Stanbrans across the head.

"Blasphemer!" he screamed hysterically. "May you rot and grow an extra eye!" Sobbing, he whirled and dashed off.

"But I do want to believe in worthy—" Stanbrans began in a shout. He never finished.

The naked feet of PanG went pattering away up the shingle in terror, northward. PanG vanished among trees. The nearby rush of the coastal waters picked up the last of Stanbrans' shout and blew it to nothing.

And that was how Stanbrans lost his travelling companion and some of his courage.

THE journey was longer than Stanbrans had anticipated.

His pouch of roots was soon empty. He was cautious about picking local specimens since their halations, orange or blue-green pulses after dark, were far more vivid than similar nocturnal lights on the peninsula. That peninsula seemed an entire existence away.

Stanbrans stuffed the remains of the carving of the little hairy god into his pouch after the roots were gone. The god's figure was crumbling, the longer Stanbrans carried it. One of its legs had fallen off, puffing to dust, when he'd found it. Day by day other bits of it, mold and fiber mixed, powdered to nothing.

With his stick he trudged on, growing light headed from hunger, then losing track of whole periods of time.

He wandered away from the coastline into a sunbaked plain empty of all habitation except some grotesquely formed bird life. Of course the party of maidens had long since disappeared ahead.

Time and again he was tempted to turn back. But he knew that if he did so, he would not only lose Borgana forever, but admit tacitly that he believed, through fear, in old and foolish gods. The little wood god in his pouch didn't frighten him. It had a kindly face. But was it a god after all?

So day without end he tramped on down the sunbaked

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plain. He drank from bubbling brackish springs and ate anything that came to hand. He had long since grown heedless of taking in poisons. To his left hand, far distant, spectacular peaks shone, lofty and cragged. They were crowned with a glittering white that sparkled in the sun. Stanbrans paid no attention beyond one cursory look, staggering on, mumbling to himself aiming for a bony ribbon of whiter white unreeling in the distance.

At last he reached this strange hard band. Its heat lacerated his bare soles. Able to stand on it only a few moments, he took to trudging beside it, reeling, crooning, enjoying fantasy conversations with Borgana. Then, far off once more, the broad and buckled ribbon of white stuff seemed to disappear into a horizon-spanning cloud that hovered just above the earth, like fog, only darker, far more sinister. In his fever-exalted state he knew he must be approaching Arsgrat's land.

He lurched onward mumbling, "Borgana, Borgana." He was thoroughly afraid of the sinister cloud that sat on the land. Yet he was able to disregard his fear because he was so thick-tongued, red-lidded with fever.

When he reached the periphery of the cloud he stumbled inside without hesitation. Off out of eye-range he heard clanks and clunkings. Closer, suddenly, there was a grunt.

He turned, dazed. Creatures scuttled at him from the swirling murk.

THEY were short, scaly-chested little persons. They had bright glittering objects in their hands and poddish pink eyes and —and—

No, his dimming sight didn't deceive him.

Writhing nests of hair upon their heads.

He lifted his stick feebly to fight. He knew these creatures must be the offspring of Editor Marshal and Needle Woman Joana Cream of whom ThreeM had spoken. But how Arsgrat created them, and now they—

Crackkk.

One of the glittering objects landed athwart his skull. He dropped, moaning.

The creatures capered around him on stubby legs. He was conscious of their voices, garrumphing, screeching, speaking to one another in a tongue at once unfamiliar and dreadful. Hands bristling with hair lifted him.

He floated along, bumped and jogged. He was held above the heads of the creatures. At one point he screamed feverishly. They were carrying him to King Arsgrat. He was afraid, because he believed—

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Struggling, flailing, he attempted to roll off the bed of hands under his spine. The creatures held him fast. Stanbrans was carried on, wiggling and kicking.

The turbulent cloud of fog—no, worse than fog; a smoky fog with a strange poisoned reek—parted once to admit the hazed silver disc of the sun. Stanbrans was delirious. He saw towering slabs of stone. From openings in them issued clanks and roars and chuffings. He saw panoramas of haired heads bobbling along below the upraised arms of his carriers. Cruel, gnarled male faces. He laughed, screamed in the hands of his captors. He wondered why, long ago, the maids had come to this brutal place every-warm time—

Then, with a roar, blackness closed and they carried him in to Arsgrat.

IV

SHORTLY after the warm time of one-hundred forty-seven Anno Lumen, a dozen and more risings and settings after the maids southward, an apparition came trudging up the peninsula.

As he walked he leaned on a staff of miraculous hardness, all glitter-bright. Men at work in the root patches shrank back from the fearsome spectre. He was emaciated beyond belief. There was a familiar quality about the youthful frame but the face was withered and wild-eyed. The head swung loosely side to side as he surveyed the huts and fields and menacing fog banks hovering off the coast.

The apparition paused at the edge of a field. He waved the incredibly bright staff, then tapped it against a rock. The contact ringing.

"Why are you staring at me?" the apparition screeched. "It's Stanbrans come home. Where is Genmot? Where is my mother Dacra? Tell them their son is home."

The apparition sat down on another rock to wait, adding laconically, "Tell them I have seen King Arsgrat."

Men ran to spread the message. Before long the whole of the peninsular community gathered around the dirty vagabond. His clout was no longer anything but a barely modest scrap. His face looked even more yellowed and deranged close hand than it had at a distance. Genmot struggled through the pushing, buzzing knots of people, eyed the young-and-old stranger warily. Then he fell upon him, hugging him. He wept:

"Stanbrans, Stanbrans! Your poor mother Dacra is dead of sorrow. I alone welcome you home. We thought you were dead. PanG returned to tell us

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you had sinned and gone in pursuit of Borgana."

"I did. But I never found her. I think the maids are kept hid in Arsgrat's domain." The wild boy, a boy no longer, swung his glittering glance over the crowd. "Where is PanG?"

"Died," came the mumble of Texins in the press. "The earth opened and he fell in and cracked his brains open."

Genmot's face lighted. "Yes, Stanbrans. We thought it punishment for your doubting the gods, and then defying him. But you are home again, alive. And the cleft in the earth is a blessing. We have found—"

"Defying?" Stanbrans broke in dreamily. He weaved slightly on his feet. "Doubting? No, father. I believe. I saw Arsgrat. I was in his kingdom. I saw his people. I saw him."

At the rear of the mob ThreeM piped, "He blasphemes again! No one dares to look upon—"

"Anyone may," Stanbrans interrupted, "who only tries. I do not know this for certain, since they never told me and I did not learn the strange jabber which they speak. But I can guess they released me after a short time so I might return to quell your doubts. The same wicked doubts I had." And he swept faces with the flaming eye of an evangel, his voice keening up to a singsong: "They don't fear us because they are a mighty people ruled by a true god. They made this wand in a clanking house."

HE flung it at Texins. The coarse, gruff man dodged away out of fear. The staff rang brightly when it hit the earth. Stanbrans was sleepily contemptuous:

"King Arsgrat must need the maidens, since I remember I saw none of his own who looked like females. If our maids did not go to him of their own choosing, perhaps his men might come to carry them off. I do not know that either. Nor do I know why the maids went to Arsgrat before the Flash." None dared interrupt him now for, like ThreeM's had been once before, the wild boy's expression was beatific as he raised his hands in the air. "King Arsgrat is the awfullest of the awful gods. He is huge in size and makes a mighty noise. Once—" A veined hand darted, birdlike, busy, to a tattered pouch. "—once I had a small shape in here. I thought it might be a god with hair. It was not a god. It crumbled to powder many days past. It was so tiny. Arsgrat is not tiny. Arsgrat is huge. He dwells in a black cave and surveys the world through a round place in its wall. His head is fiery with a mane of long yellow hair. Yes, hair. Don't sigh and roll your

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eyes. I have seen it. His teeth are this long, wet and sharp. His face is not like a human's. It is more than a human's. It is a god's."

Slowly Stanbrans reached down and picked up the miraculous shining staff. Its very solidity, its spun-white surface, its cool, hard feel was proof of his story. The faces of the people showed that. While Stanbrans prepared to speak again he was conscious, as he had been ever since finding himself abandoned outside the roiling cloud that sat eternally over Arsgrat's kingdom, of the easy pleasantness of thought. He assumed Arsgrat's people had abandoned him because they were not afraid of him, and he was too worthless to kill. Not at all. The very expressions all about him now, frightened, tense expressions, testified to his worth.

Ah yes, how cool and easy was thought. Borgana was a dream and so was doubt. His voice became exalted:

"Arsgrat opens his mighty jaw and makes thunder to shake the sky. His yellow eyes burn. And round about the round place in the wall of the black cave from which he looks out, there are mystical squiggles, very like those in the holy Sperhutuch. I do not know what they mean, but I memorized their shapes. When I saw Arsgrat face to face, and heard him roar his defiance, I knew that he was the greatest of the gods. And this his invocation—"

Carefully, haltingly, Stanbrans drew horizontals and verticals in the dust with the tip of the bright staff. Now he scratched out, now he stirred dust puffs, now he began again, until he had blocked out the talisman shapes seared into his skull forever:

ARS GRATIA ARTIS.

SHAKING their heads, the people murmured among themselves. Genmot stared at his adopted boy as though realizing he had arrived a second time more a stranger than he had the first. Shyly he plucked Stanbrans' bony arm.

"My son, another miracle has come to pass while you journeyed to Arsgrat. When the earth opened and PanG died, ThreeM, being the headshrinker, was elected to descend into the pit. We found peculiar squarish things in profusion, buried long. We found the holy handwork. We found—" Genmot licked his aging lips and whispered on: "—the unbelievable."

Flatly Stanbrans said, "I believe it."

"Come," said Genmot eagerly. "We're no longer afraid. Since the gods revealed their greatness to you as well as to us, my con-

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viction is stronger than ever that we are not to display terror before their miracles, but worship joyfully, as befits holy handwork. This is the first time the earth has opened to remain open. This time I think we are meant to wonder. To learn if we can. To imitate if we dare."

With a discreet cough, as though he did not wish to behave crudely, Genmot lowered his voice: "My son, the headshrinker is an old man—"

"Yes," Stanbrans nodded. "And he has not seen Arsgrat."

In perfect harmony, father and son clambered down a series of crudely carved steps in the side of a gaping declevity open in a nearby hillside. When they were so far down the light overhead was a mere whitish speck, Stanbrans saw his father ahead grope his way across a hard surface, then drop out of sight through a ragged opening.

Stanbrans followed. He landed with a jolt on a second hard surface buried beneath a layer of silt. How the queer, dark enclosure had survived the crushings of the land above, Stanbrans could not say, unless it had been constructed down here by the gods for that express purpose. He wondered what his father would have to say on the subject.

Genmot was busy rustling in the dark. All around, Stanbrans glimpsed strange objects and artifacts limned in the dim drift of light from above. With calm wonder he realized many of them resembled pieces of the holy handwork as revealed in the Sperhutuch. Genmot, however, diverted his son's attention and drew him toward a niche in one of the enclosure's hard verticals. Above, others of the peninsular people had clambered down to the opening. They crouched around it in an awed ring, pointing and whispering.

"I know there are many wonders and revelations to feast the eye upon, my son." Genmot endeavored to speak without emotion, though his voice betrayed a slight uncertainty. "But this seems to be the miracle which produces all others."

In truth, Stanbrans was somewhat disappointed, though he strove mightily not to be. The object which his father indicated was a small, oblong box resting on the niche shelf. Its sides were of dark grayish stuff, upon which Genmot struck one of his scaled, horny nails.

The light and piercing ring brought a smile to Stanbrans' face. "It sings, like the shining rod."

Genmot nodded. "Yes. And these—well, old ThreeM stumbled when he first crawled down here. As he cried out and fell, his hand clasped one."

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GENMOT referred to a long row of round levers protruding across the front of the box, directly above a line of the meaningless squiggles. Half way down this line, dividing it, was a curious design—half a dozen narrow ellipses, with a shining, sparkling little ball at the common point of the six axes. The whole design, like the squiggles, was raised from the material of the box.

Genmot's fingers hovered near the levers as he went on: "Had ThreeM not touched these by accident, we might never have seen—" To conclude the sentence he raised a lever.

On the overhead surfaces of the enclosure, strips of light burned suddenly, blinding Stanbrans. With a gasp he threw a forearm across his face. People outside the opening shrank back. Instantly the enclosure was plunged back to darkness by Genmot's hand. Stanbrans' mind echoed an image of shining, tubular artifacts everywhere.

"Whatever strange power is small enough to lodge in this tiny box," Genmot whispered, "has a life that is ages long, and endures and endures. All the strange rods we will try in turn, for they produce wondrous happenings. But first, here is the one which produces the greatest miracle. Look behind you."

Genmot lifted another lever. Now he stepped close to his son, the two of them staring raptly at a low, square artifact supported on four short poles of gleaming stuff. Through minute perforations in the side of the piece of handwork, tiny mystic orange lights glowed. Occupying most of the face of the square thing was a queer sort of window.

Whiteness erupted in the window. Stanbrans drew another sharp breath. Ghostly radiance illuminated his face.

Genmot was in a transport of joy: "We never believed, my son. We never believed in that."

Feeling comfortable in the damp dark with the whispering community of believers nearby, Stanbrans slowly shook his head. He smiled, gliding forward, extending his hand.

A wary frown cut Genmot's forehead. But he said nothing. Stanbrans reached out. He was unable to touch the whiteness framed in the window. The window was actually a short space behind a clear hardness that spread all across the front.

He ran his hand over the clear hardness, peering through it to the window, on whose surface he saw dancing, shining, jiggling, patternless white motes.

Ah. The ultimate promise fulfilled. The snow was indeed beautiful.

THE END

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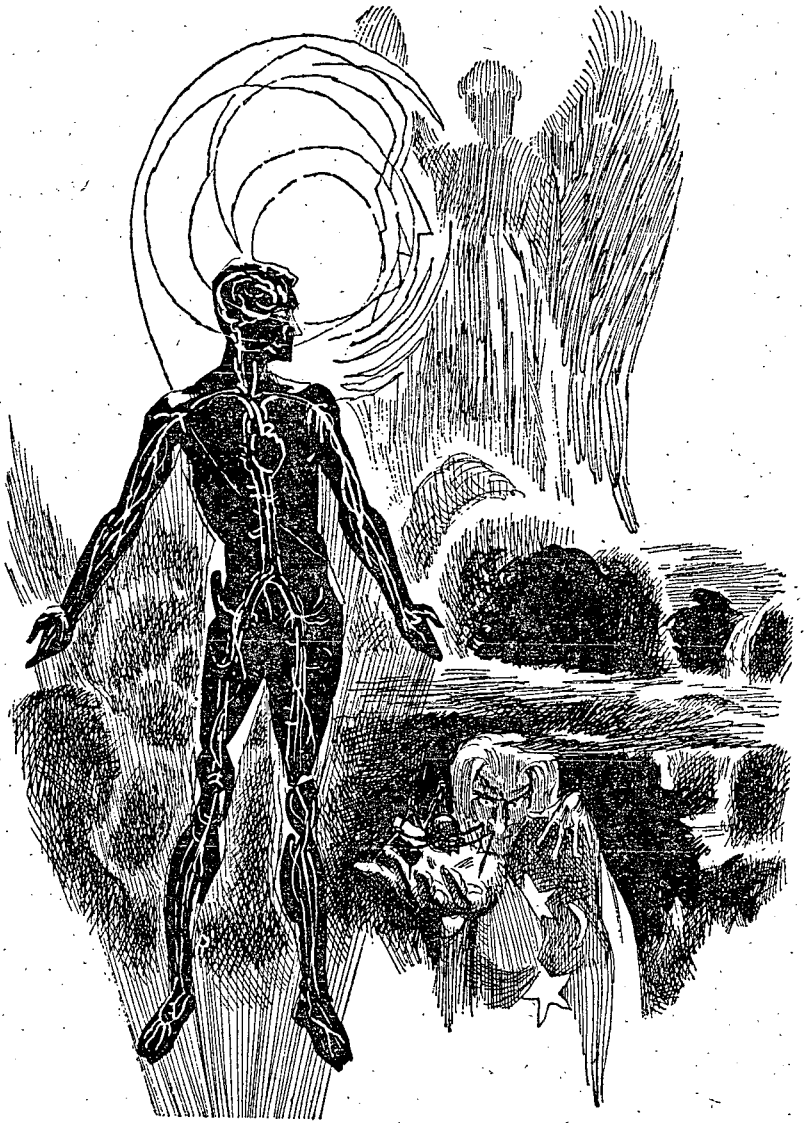
Illustrator SUMMERS



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Ghost and Ghoul

By T. C. LETHBRIDGE

IT seems reasonably certain that all extra-sensory phenomena are not products of the brain working on its normal level in everyday life. The brain appears to deal entirely with information supplied by the normal senses. The extra-sensory faculties do not necessarily pass through the brain at all. They appear to arrive at a distinct thing, the mind, direct. The mind and the soul are apparently two words for the same thing. This distinction between the extra-sensory and normal sensory faculties is of great importance when considering the question of the survival of the personality after bodily death.

There are two schools of thought. The religious school maintains that it has been informed that the individual survives bodily death. The materialist school denies the possibility of this. Humanity, as a whole, does not really believe that either school knows what it is talking about. But it would very much like to know the answer. The ordinary man is not so dumb that he cannot see that the materialistic view is just as much a matter of faith as the religious one.

The chief argument of the materialist is that, since all memory is stored in the brain, without the brain tissues there can be no memory, nor any form of thought. Religious theory doubts the possibility of coming to any conclusion by the use of reasoning or experiment. The truth is revealed to it and that is that.

But the study of extra-sensory perception appears to support a third theory, which maintains that the body is only a piece of mechanism, used by a mind, which is distinct from the brain, as a convenience during its time on earth. The mind does not have its home on earth, but only comes to it to collect information. The brain, according to this theory, is a kind of filter, useful for excluding experiences, which would only confuse earth dwellers. One might compare the brain to a resistance on an electric circuit.

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Let us take the familiar case of the fitting of an electric bell to ring off the main electricity supply in a house. The apparatus to be used for ringing the bell does not require much power to work it. In actual practice it may require eight volts. A more powerful bell than this would be wasteful and expensive to run. You do not need the full force of the power available to make the bell ring. It would in fact burn the apparatus out. The available supply is perhaps one of two hundred volts. You therefore put a contrivance, known as a resistance, into the wire circuit, which joins the main current to the bell. This resistance lowers the power of the electric current running through the circuit from two hundred volts to eight. The eight volts are quite strong enough to make the bell ring.

Now it seems possible that the machine, which we know as 'our body', we do not even speak of it as ourselves, may well be in the position of the electric bell in the circuit, or rather of the apparatus used to make the bell ring. It is economically designed for collecting information on this particular earth level; but it does not require the whole of the current available to us for its use. While on this earth it is not necessary that it should record everything that is happening around it. It is not designed, for instance, to record the wireless waves which are passing through it, nor is it designed to record more than a limited range of sound waves and those of light, although we know that waves of both kinds exist on either side of the scale which it does record.

The brain acts like the resistance in the electric circuit. Its recordings are made available by a limited number of senses, each with a limited range. We ourselves, however, are outside this circuit and are the users of the instrument, the ringers of the bell. We have no idea what our real voltage is.

Those persons whose extra-sensory perception is high, appear to be able to register other ranges on their machines. Perhaps everybody can do so when taught the correct procedure. You undo a screw perhaps, and slide something along a bar; at least that is what you can do with some man-made resistances.

WHEN somebody finds out the trick of undoing the screw, altering the voltage and using the increased power to heal somebody else of a disease, it is known as a miracle. If he does it to smash the machine of an enemy and kill his body, it is known as magic. There is no distinction between magic and miracle and no distinction between either and Dr. Abram's Box. All are supra-

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normal activities, because normal voltage does not permit them to be operated.

The trick of undoing the screw and changing the voltage is known as faith. Faith is really a 'know-how' with confidence and if one reads the Gospels as if they were reports of ordinary mundane affairs, it is clear that Christ, who was the greatest worker of miracles of whom we have a record, not only knew how to undo the screw, but could teach his followers how to do it too. What could you do if you had faith? Well, you could heal diseases in other people; you could disregard such natural forces as gravitation, and walk on the water; you could control wind and sea; you could change matter and turn water into wine, or order a mountain mass to be moved into the sea. In fact you could do all sorts of things which can only be effected by an ordinary body if provided with elaborate mechanical aids.

The matter of faith was entirely distinct from the moral code of life which Christ taught and which he evidently believed to be far more important than any working of miracles. The moral code was an absolute necessity if men were to be possessed of great magical power. In the sequel, they soon lost the knowledge of how to obtain the power and it is undoubtedly fortunate that they did so. It was highly dangerous in the hands of people who did not hesitate to use it to remove persons of whom they did not happen to approve. From time to time, however, others have learnt how to undo the screw and these have by no means been confined to any one religion.

The one essential for obtaining faith was to go back to the very beginning. You had to become like a little child and learn to look at things in a different way. This sounds quite impossible; but for a long time now science has looked at things in a different way to that in which the bulk of mankind looks at them. A red coat is not a red coat to a scientist. It may be called a coat, but most of it is entirely empty space, in which are small particles of matter with elaborate chemical formulae. It is partly composed of matter, no doubt, but it has become impossible for the scientist to distinguish between matter and energy. As for the colour, it happens to be every colour except red. When such terrible things can occur to the ordinary man's idea of what constitutes a red coat, it becomes clear that we have remarkably little idea what anything really is at all. The way in which we were brought up to look at the world may be entirely fictitious. In fact it is

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only a convenience provided by our resistance. The instruction then that we must become as little children clearly means that we have to forget for a time all the construction put on the world by teaching and experience as we were growing up, and learn to look at everything in a different way. How we were to look at things was carefully not included in the Gospel reports, or if it was, it has been cut out again, for it was the secret of how you could harness enormous power by means of your own equipment. Possibly the secret is still known, even in Europe, but it is far too dangerous to be let loose on humanity until the moral code, which is its counterpart, is universally accepted. This code never was accepted and the power remains untapped. Mankind, however, is steadily evolving mechanical substitutes to take its place.

OF the three contending theories as to the existence of human personality after bodily death, the one which puts the human brain into the position of a resistance on an electric circuit seems to be the most reasonable. One cannot accept the materialistic theory that life is an accident, and all evolution has happened by chance, simply because it does not account for such things as the dragonfly's life-cycle. No stretch of the imagination can make it into an explanation of the innumerable cases in the world of nature in which animals at some point in their lives change over from living in one element to living in a totally different one. There are many other ways in which it seems to be quite impossible for it to be the correct answer. One is reminded of the old, and still effective, question of 'How did that clock get on to that wall, unless somebody made it and put it there?' One is simply driven to this position by objective reasoning; unless one has some blind faith in the materialistic opposite. Whereas, however, the religious man can say that God communicated his belief to him, the materialist can only reply, 'I told myself that this must be so.' We, having somehow been provided with a mechanism which can think, are surely entitled to reason things out for ourselves and express what doubts we please about either of these two beliefs.

But if somebody made the clock and put it on the wall, they did it for a purpose. They put it there to measure the passage of time. Presumably, therefore, the world of nature was put there for a purpose also, and not only the world of nature, but the earth, the solar system, the galaxy and all the galaxies seen and unseen. It can hardly have been done for

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fun. We are surely justified in thinking that mankind was made for a useful purpose; but we are also in the position of not knowing what that purpose is. In fact it looks very much as if whoever made the clock deliberately refrained from telling it why he had done so. It presumably does not aid the purpose if the individual knows what this is.

Although, however, we do not seem likely to be told the purpose for which we are intended, there do seem to be a steadily accumulating collection of clues as to what happens to us next. These clues, many of which have been gathered over the years by the students of psychical research, all appear to point in the same direction. They all tend to support the third proposition, namely that the human body is only a machine, or piece of apparatus, designed for use in this particular phase of living; but utterly useless and thrown away as a piece of junk when it is worn out. The user of the apparatus is our real self. The body is simply a useful thing for gaining information during our earthly life. Its usefulness could not have been secured by the designer without the inclusion of a resistance, the brain, because our own voltage is too high to be used on this low earthly level. Why the information is needed, or who really needs it, we do not know. The evidence, however, seems to point to it being ourselves who need it, even if we pass it on later to a common pool of knowledge in a club of persons similar to ourselves.

AFTER bodily death, the resistance is not needed any more; because we will then be living on a different plane at a much higher frequency. We then presumably use more of our full voltage. This plane is the one known to the parapsychologists by the rather unsatisfactory term of 'astral'. Astral means 'pertaining to the stars' and does not appear to be a correct definition. The astral world seems to be very much the same as this one and in the same general position; but, since the frequency of everything on it is much higher, we cannot see, hear or feel it, any more than we can see, hear or feel broadcasting transmissions without a receiving set, although they are passing through us all the time. The people living on the astral plane can therefore pass through all the material objects which we know on this earth and which seem solid enough to us. Without the resistance of the brain, we would presumably be able to see the astral people. As it is we cannot do so and they cannot see us without lowering their rate of vibration. For this they must no doubt use

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some form of resistance which has not as yet been described in such a way that we can really understand it. When using this resistance, they can to some extent communicate with such of us as have their faculties of extra-sensory perception highly developed.

The astral body of persons living on the next plane is said to be a replica of the earthly body without its blemishes. It is said, in fact, to be with us all the time; interpenetrating our existing body through the wide interstices of empty space which form the major part of it. Being on a higher frequency, there is no apparent connection between the two bodies. One might make a simple comparison by thinking of the propeller of an aircraft. When at rest this appears to be a solid object with widely separated blades. When it is turning at high speed, you cannot see it at all, or at most would take it to be a disc of vapour. There seems to be nothing impossible, nor even improbable, about this idea of the astral body. At any rate it is the most reasonable idea that I have as yet heard. More than that, it is not at variance with the natural laws which have been established with regard to our earthly plane.

Let us see what this idea seems to indicate: We are living on this earth for some reason which we do not know; but it is reasonably clear that it is not the result of accidental evolution. We are, however, apparently informed, by people who have died already, that it is to gain more experience for a club of people of the same general type as ourselves. The idea is to raise the general standard of knowledge of each particular club, in order that it may move up the scale to higher levels of existence. Further than that we need not inquire in this study.

To live on this material earth, which has a relatively low frequency, we have to be provided with a resistance called a brain, which can filter the information needed out of a much greater volume of happenings. This brain is housed in a body, which has to feed the brain, as well as itself, in order to keep the very elaborate mechanism working. After a time, the whole machine wears out and can be thrown on the rubbish heap. It is not us. It is just something which has been useful for a particular expedition and experiment and is of no more value than a worn-out pair of climbing boots.

After death, that is the breakdown of the worn-out or damaged machine, we are still living, and perhaps have always been living and always will do so. We have been watching the activities of our machine and storing the

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results to tell to our friends in the club. While the earthly body has been working, we have been occupying the same general area of space. When it dies, we are still there as an astral body of much higher frequency. We are precisely in the position of the dragonfly imago, which has emerged from its nymph case. Something has been thrown away in each case. We just happen to be able to watch the dragonfly in its phases of living in the water and in the air. The dead case is thrown away when the dragonfly nymph changes into an air-borne insect. I do not know whether anyone has attempted to measure the frequencies of these two stages of the dragonfly's life-cycle, or whether it would be practicable to do so. But I feel reasonably certain that they would be quite different and that the dragonfly nymph could never see the dragonfly imago, even if the refraction of light between water and air would occasionally permit it to do so.

Now, what seems to happen in the case of magic and miracles is that those who perform them have learnt a way of speeding up their frequencies, from the earthly to the astral level, by cutting out the resistance of the brain. How they manage to do so is a mystery. But it seems to be a mystery which is not beyond the bounds of human ingenuity to solve and to describe in scientific terms.

I SAID at the beginning of this study that I felt that, whatever explanations there might be to account for the events which we have been examining, these explanations would follow natural laws. It begins to look as if there are no explanations which do not follow laws of this kind. The phenomena are only unusual, because the faculties which produce them were meant to be damped down, by the resistance of the brain, so that they would not be a nuisance in the rough and tumble of life on this plane. It is possible that with man's increasing mastery of his environment, the point is being reached when it will be possible to undo the screw and push the indicator along the bar of the resistance a bit. But I hardly think that it would be safe to do so yet. There is I think a clear case here for greatly extended work on all these phenomena. It is possible to look forward to a time when these faculties will be employed for the good of the whole of mankind, through the sensible employment of a great new force whose power is hardly guessed. But there are risks too, for there is black magic as well as white.

THE END

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THE LEECH

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrator SUMMERS

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A man can go to jail for practicing medicine without a license. But Klaber had no such intention . . . not when there were lives to be saved.

THE fat man in the white suit stepped ponderously along the dusty plank sidewalk along the single block of commercial buildings in the small Texas town. Each step had a pause in it, as though every time his foot came down he half-determined to remain in that position forever. The sunlight lay heavily everywhere, warm sticky yellow paint sprayed lavishly from a sky like the electric blue mouth of a kiln.

The fat man was unfortunately fair-skinned, and the folds at the back of his neck were a hot, painful pink from the sun, while the backs of his soft hands glowed a purple-red as the thinner skin there cooked partially through to the bone. When he raised a hand to shade his eyes momentarily, the underarm area of his white jacket stood out wet grey against the cloth, and a close look at his thick-featured face showed pearls and sequins of sweat glistening and runneling through every quarter inch of flesh. His eyelashes were pale blond, though not so pale as his rapidly greying hair, and his pastel blue eyes—when he dared open them fully against the glare—stared out from his face like two hints of mold on a large white wet cheese.

The large white hat he wore protected his face better than the back of his neck, perhaps because he slouched when he stood up, letting his heavy chin be borne by his fat neck. Beneath the thin fabric of his clothing, pockets and pouches of flesh entrapped trickles of sweat, grew steadily salty and raw, and developed almost maddening itches which the fat man was wise enough not to scratch into flaming infection. His feet he tried his best to ignore; walking the dusty road and stark wooden pavements, the leather binding them had become like the lid of a cast-iron stove. If a muddy pool of cool water had lain anywhere between himself and his destination, he would have shorn his clothes with his responsibilities and wallowed there until the slight relief of sunset.

A BLOCK beyond the town crossroad, where the feed store, gas station, pharmacy and

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unkempt park faced each other with sullen animosity, he came to the address he sought, made his way gratefully through the black screen door and the open door beyond it into the lobby of the hotel.

Behind the desk, across the darkness of the lobby—lights made too much heat—the clerk lay back limply in a wooden chair, shirtless, fanning himself with a rolled-up newspaper and breathing as little as possible in the muggy air of the place. The fat man, squinting against the undulating waves of color that formed within his eye after stepping from yellow glare into humid gloom, finally saw his quarry and moved slowly across the room to the desk.

The clerk, without either changing position or opening his eyes, said listlessly, "Single room and bath, two bucks a night. Doubles three-fifty. Payment in advance."

"I don't want a room," said the fat man. "I'm looking for a person called Klaber. Eric Klaber. Is he rooming here?"

The clerk sighed, grateful not to have to get out the heavy registry book, and nodded, still eyeshut and limp. "Room 202," he said, before relapsing back into his semi-comatose state. "Upstairs, back."

The fat man turned without thanking the clerk, eyed the long oak stairway with distaste, then moved slowly to it, braced one hand on the varnished newel post, and started his laborious ascent, ignoring the hair that fell in his eyes with the effort. At the door of the room he removed his hat for the first time since going out that morning, and pressed down the wet gray strands into a semblance of neatness before rapping. His knuckles had barely left the paneling when the door swung open, and a short stocky man was looking at him with a shrewd, speculative air.

"Dr. Klaber?" said the fat man.

Something flickered in the other man's eyes, then he replied carefully. "My name is Klaber, yes. But I'm not a doctor." He made no move to let the fat man pass.

"Perhaps," the fat man said, with a brief twitch of humor, "that's what all the hollering's about."

This time, the short stocky man stepped back. "Come in," he said, moving ahead of the other into the room, and half-throwing himself into a chair in the darkened corner. The fat man paused on the threshhold, then closed the door behind himself and moved quietly to a chair facing the other's. It was a deep, padded armchair he chose, but a fat man is much more comfort-

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able in a soft chair than on a hard. He let his thick buttocks find the cushion, depress it, and then with a grunt allowed the chair arms to rise up about his gelatinous sides and hold him in a snug horsehair grip. The occupant of the room had not moved during this operation, but there was a look in his gaze that couldn't make up its mind whether to be amusement or pity.

"You have the advantage of me," he said, seeing his guest was through settling down. "You know who I am, but—" He stopped speaking and waited.

"My name is Hoxie," he said. "From the sheriff's office, McCulloch County. Followed you up here from Brady." As if hoping the other man would simply come quietly, the man called Hoxie let his mouth fall shut, and sat, waiting.

WHEN Klaber spoke, it was with carefully chosen words. "I have broken no law," he said.

"That remains to be seen," said Hoxie. Every word cost his gross body an effort, and he unconsciously determined that the more talking he had to do to this man Klaber, the worse would be his own testimony on the stand when describing the process of Klaber's arrest. There are more than physical ways of resisting arrest. Loquacity can gum up the wheels of justice, too.

Klaber got to his feet, suddenly, and Hoxie had a short thrill of fear for his own person, knowing he was helpless to get from the chair without an effort. But Klaber simply said, "It's hot in here. You must be exhausted. Would you like a gin and tonic? I have no ice."

Hoxie relaxed. "That *would* be nice," he admitted. "My engine boiled over a mile outside town. Had to walk the rest of the way in."

Klaber nodded and went into the bathroom. Hoxie listened to the clinking of glass and gurgling of liquid, and then Klaber came back with two tall bubbly drinks. He held out both toward his guest.

"Take either," he said, "and I'll drink part of mine while you watch." Hoxie stared, then grinned briefly. He'd been too warm to consider being doped or poisoned by Klaber, but he appreciated the other's gesture.

"Thanks," he said, selecting the nearest glass to his right hand. "But we're not after you for *hurting* folks."

Klaber nodded his gratitude, and resumed his seat. For a few minutes, the men just sat and sipped their drinks. Hoxie found his good. Warm, but good. For the moment, it slaked the dusty feeling from his gullet, even though he knew it would make him even warmer in a few min-

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utes. He drained his glass and set it on the floor beside the chair. His limp white fingers had to drop it the last inch, but it did not tip over.

Klaber, with half a drink to go, said, "Don't you have any questions to ask me? Or am I simply supposed to come quietly?"

Hoxie managed the approximation of a shrug. "Nothing official, Doc—Mister Klaber," he amended hastily, giving the other the benefit of the doubt he'd withheld at their meeting. "Being a human man, I'm curious, of course. But I have to warn you that anything you tell me can be used in your trial. So, suit yourself."

"I—I'd *like* to talk to someone," said Klaber, suddenly earnest and frank. "This line of, well, work that I'm in is a kind of lonely business. No one, only myself, knows just what I do. I'll blow my top if I *don't* talk to someone . . ."

"Maybe," said Hoxie, "if I told you exactly what you're charged with, you could tell me about *that*. No point in adding to your offenses by spilling some beans we didn't know were in the pot."

Klaber thought this over, then nodded. "Go ahead."

MAIN charge is practicing medicine without a license. We *think*. Your 'patient' said she'd never say a word against you if we set fire to her shimmy. Can't really blame her, none, but— Well, law is law. You—" he said, almost wistfully, "You don't happen to *have* a license, maybe?"

Klaber shook his head. The sun was past meridian, now, and the orange light filtering through the drawn shade showed Hoxie a head of hair grayer than his own.

"Too bad," he said, with genuine regret. "Means I got to take you in. Hate to, under the circumstances."

"Gettin' so's a man can't do a good deed 'thout steppin' on someone's toes," said Klaber, with a wry one-sided twist of his mouth that nearly passed for a grin.

Hoxie tried a shrug again, and failed. "Gov'ment's got good-deed-doin' sewed up tighter'n a drum," he agreed. "You wanna tell me just what it was you did t' Miss Perkle?"

"Fixed her," said Klaber. "That's all. No different than if I'd found her hobblin' around with a nail in her foot and pulled it out. That don't bust no law."

"No," Hoxie admitted. "*That* don't. But this is more medical."

"Who says so?" demanded Klaber, with a stubborn outthrust of his lower lip. "*I can't* see the difference."

"A nail in the foot is a nail in

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the foot," said Hoxie. "And cancer is cancer."

"Phooey," said Klaber. "Same thing, to my mind. Person gets a foreign body in 'em, causin' discomfort, and you take it out. Can't see any difference at all, nohow."

"There are certain medical-type ways of doin' things," said Hoxie. "You didn't use even an accepted method, we hear tell. And that's bad."

"You ain't serious!" said Klaber, aghast. "You can't be serious! You mean t'tell me the medical profession can get a guy in bad for the law on *both* them counts? How can a guy infringe their territory enough to get called on practicin' medicine without a license if the guy also gets called on for not doin' what they do anyways?"

Hoxie blinked. This aspect had not occurred to him. "Well, hold on, now . . ." he said thoughtfully. "What you're really gettin' called on is a kind of in-*between* them two laws. Practicin' medicine *badly* without a license."

Klaber guffawed, and Hoxie reddened as he realized the idiocy of the charge. Trying to hold onto his court-appointed dignity, he went on, "You know what I mean, Klaber! There's a right way t' fix folks, and you claim to fix folks, but you don't do it right."

Klaber shrugged. "What if they don't give no license to do it my way? What if there ain't no such license, nohow? 'Pears to me a man can't get put in jail for not gettin' a license that can't be got."

"That," Hoxie suddenly pontificated, taking the last final refuge of all out-maneuvered sheriff's men, "is for a court 'f law t' decide."

"You mean you're stumped!" said Klaber, with more accuracy. Hoxie did not reply. His host got up, and once again Hoxie felt that peculiar thrill of fear for his own person, but Klaber simply went to the bureau, opened the drawer, and came back with a small matchbox that had a rubber band holding its sliding drawer shut. He jabbed this thing in front of Hoxie's eyes, and snapped, "The whole secret's in this box. The whole durned secret! And it seems t' me it ain't the kind o' thing a guy gets arrested for."

HOXIE attempted to reach for the box, but Klaber returned to his chair and set the box almost absent-mindedly upon the small writing table near the window. "I ain't going t' let myself get arrested," he said abruptly. "It ain't fair, a man's time being in the hands of the courts. What if I'm proved innocent? While I'm wastin' time in court, there may be lots of folks

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dyin' who I coulda helped. The court can't repay them their lives, can they?" All at once, a peculiar expression washed over his face, and he looked sharply at Hoxie. "Say, look now— Don't somebody have t' sign a complaint for me to get picked up? You sure you ain't just funnin' me, Mister? 'Cause I *know* that old Miss Perkle wouldna signed nothing, and she's the only soul I helped in this county."

"Wasn't her signed it," said Hoxie. "Her nephew, Tim Perkle, did the signing. He was right mad."

"Well, of all the—! *Sure* he was mad!" Klaber exploded. "Him comin' down here all the way from Denver, t' get poor Annie Perkle's money when she died, her havin' just three-four weeks t' live— And then I fix her up fine and healthy again! Sure he was mad. An' I'll bet it wasn't 'cause his sense of medical rights felt violated, either!"

Hoxie, who had thought the same thing when Tim Perkle had burst into the sheriff's office, said nothing. But when it seemed Klaber was going to do nothing but sit and fume some more in silence, Hoxie spoke up.

"If I *knew* a little thing or two— I mean, if it's not too complicated, or nothing—I could maybe put in a good word for you at the trial, Klaber. As it is, all I know is you're a right stubborn man who don't seem to hold much with obeyin' the law."

"I'm obeyin' a higher law!" said Klaber, so coldly that Hoxie's three-hundred-thirty-five pounds felt a momentary comfortable thrill of frost.

"Ain't no higher law in McCulloch County than the one you busted," said Hoxie, "except killin' a person."

"And that don't sound screwy to you?!" Klaber exploded. "The two top laws are for killin' and curin'? What's *left*, anyhow!?"

"Now, look—" said Hoxie, wishing he was not so tightly jammed in the armchair. Klaber had a shimmery look of violence about his face.

"Okay!" said Klaber, shutting his eyes and regaining control. "Okay, Hoxie, I'll tell it calm and simple. When you were a kid, didn't you ever stick a leech on a shiner t' get the black out from around your eye?"

"Well, sure," said Hoxie.

"Ain't that medical?" asked Klaber.

"Not—Not 'zactly. I mean, everybody does it!"

"Okay, then, how about the Indians. They got a swell cure for a torn-up knee, when the ligaments is all busted. They take a prairie dog, slit open its belly and pull the guts out, and strap the warm, hollow body around the knee for a week. Fixes it fine."

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"I never *done* that," said Hoxie, slowly, "but I have heard tell of it . . ."

"That bust any law?"

"I don't rightly know. Maybe not for an Injun."

"Okay, then," said Klaber. "Then what's wrong with this?" He pointed to the banded matchbox. "I got me a little crittur in there does the same thing for cancer that prairie dog bodies does for knees, or leeches for shiners. Sucks out the hurt and poison. Fixes folks fine. What's the harm in it?"

IF that's the truth of the thing," said Hoxie, "there don't seem t' be *no* harm in it. But you ought t' tell somebody 'bout it. Let the world know. Pretty soon, everybody gets cured, and we're all happy about it."

"Unh-uh," said Klaber, shaking his head. "Pretty soon, once one of them bug-study fellers figures out what kind o' bug this is, they start breedin' em, raisin' em. And at first, there'll be lotsa folks needin' help but not enough bugs t' go around. So they'll charge plenty, plen-ty, to come around with the bug. And the rich folks'll get fixed before the poor ones, and some folks who oughta die anyhow will live, and it won't be right at all."

"You mean," said Hoxie, "*you* can decide who's gonna—who's gonna live or die, but you don't want nobody else's ideas along that line crowdin' you?"

"Right," said Klaber. "Besides, I don't charge nothin'. I go around, from town to town, find out who's sick, get t' meet 'em, and if they strikes me as the right sort, I—I fix 'em. If they don't, I say 'Nice meetin' you,' and move on. Depends on the person. Nice folks ought t' live, bad folks ought t' die. The medical people try and save all the folks, and that ain't right. Why, do you know, if a man is s'posed t' go to the gas chamber, or get hung, an' he gets sick, they call off the execution till the medics make him well again, 'stead o' lettin' him die by himself?"

"Well," said Hoxie, "I knowed that, o' course, but I never paid much mind to it before now."

"Okay, so now that you're payin' some, ain't it the stupidest thing you ever did hear of?"

"That ain't for me t' say," said Hoxie, suddenly realizing that Klaber could testify to the conversation at time of arrest just as damagingly to him as he could to Klaber.

"In other words, you're takin' me in!" said Klaber. "After all I said, you're takin' me in!"

"Got to," said Hoxie. "It's the law."

"And what if the law's wrong?" said Klaber. "It *can* be,

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you know. That's why the Constitution's got amendments."

"This law ain't been amended yet," said Hoxie. "I got to take you in."

"You got a gun or somethin'?" asked Klaber.

"Had a rifle in the car. Too hot t' carry it. Besides, you being a do-gooder, we didn't figure you'd give trouble."

"You figured wrong," said Klaber. "There's a boy in this town, not more'n fifteen years old, got stomach cancer. I was fixin' t' do something about it. He's a good kid, helps his maw around the house, studies good in school, an' all. By the time I go with you an' come back, he'll be dead. And that's only if I get *off*. He's 'bout due t' die in two weeks. I fixed Miss Perkle a week ago. That means the bug's just ripe to draw someone again. Takes a week to work itself up an appetite."

"You got two weeks," said Hoxie. "Maybe we can get back here in a week, and you can still fix him."

"'N if we don't?" said Klaber, and Hoxie did not answer. "Nope," Klaber went on. "I can't see coming with you. You just gotta go back an' tell the sheriff I ain't coming."

"I do that, and he'll horsewhip me. Besides which, he'll come here himself, with a posse of armed men, and get you, good. He didn't figure you'd give so much talk-back, or he'd-a sent 'em the first place."

Klaber shrugged. "Well, I ain't going. So that's that."

HOXIE, moving carefully, pried himself out of the chair until he towered in all his enormity over the other man. He smiled a little. "I don't wanta make no ruckus, Klaber, but I will if I hafta."

Klaber eyed his visitors bulk as though sizing up, and rejecting, his chance of outwrestling all that flabby beef, then slumped. "Ain't there nothin'—Ain't there no way of my stayin' here and savin' that boy?"

Hoxie hesitated. "Tell me about the fixin' of Miss Perkle. After all, that's the charge we got you on, not just a general one of do-goodin'. If you can talk out from under Tim Perkle's charge, I'll go an' forget I found where you were at. Just so's I got a line on shuttin' Tim up."

"Nothin' much t' tell. I told her, 'I heard you was sick,' and I offered to try a way I knew to fix her up. She said yes, because she liked me, and besides, there wasn't much anyone *else* could do for her. So—on accounta most refined ladies is jumpy 'bout bugs—I told her the process was secret, an' had her stick her hand through a hole in a sheet hangin' beside her bed. Then—"

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"Her *hand?*" said Hoxie. "Miss Perkle was all right around the hands. It was in her chest that the trouble was."

"Don't make no mind," said Klaber. "This here bug, I figure, works on what they call 'affinity'. It sizes up the body it's bit into, figures out the most easily spared part, and sucks it up. At the same time, it squirts some kinda juice into the blood that lets the part its after know what's up, and all the bad stuff comes loose, flows to the tiny little hole the critter makes, and out and down its gullet."

"Don't that make the crittur grow some?" asked Hoxie.

"Considerable," nodded Klaber. "Swole up t' near a foot around, with Miss Perkle. But —" he pointed to the tiny matchbox "—like I said, it's been a week. It's empty again."

"I'd sure appreciate seein' this crittur," said Hoxie, mopping his streaming brow with a damp white handkerchief.

"Okay," said Klaber. "But look quick-like. It's hungry, now, and I wouldn't want it leapin' out and fastenin' on you."

Hoxie drew back a step. "What'd happen?" he said. "I mean, seein' as I got no cancer 'r nothin'?"

"It'd take the next best thing," said Klaber.

Hoxie scratched his head. "Such as what?"

"The last growth you had, o' course," said Klaber, as if impatient Hoxie did not see yet the manner of the bug's functioning. "When you were an unborn baby, the very last thing to develop in your body was all the fat you got. Oh, not so much's you got *now*, o' course, but that's the last thing a body grows, you know. So this here bug'd have you turned to a toothpick in no time."

Hoxie's mouth had fallen slightly open. "Lemme get this straight, Klaber—You mean t' say . . . If that crittur got holda me, I'd—I'd slim down some?"

"Some?" said Klaber, with a cackling, scornful laugh. "This here bug's an all 'r nothin' crittur. You wouldn't have no fat left a-tall!"

"Klaber—" said Hoxie, flicking out a pink tongue to lick salty-wet thick lips. "Maybe—Maybe I'd *like* t' have that crittur fasten on. You know, I don't much *'preciate* havin' this tonnage t' tote around with me. In weather like this, it can be killin' to a man, almost."

YOU'RE sayin' you want me t' do you a *favor* before you take me off t' jail?" said Klaber. "You're loco, Hoxie."

"Well, now, wait, now just hold on. I ain't said I was gonna take you definite, *yet!*" said Hoxie, desperately. "Tell you

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what—I could make a kind of deal with you—"

"You mean," said Klaber, "if I just get some of that lard off'n your carcass, you'll forget all that high-type important *law* you been spoutin' about, and lie t' your sheriff?!"

"Durn tootin' I would," said Hoxie. "The sheriff, he don't never pass up an opportunity t' say something he thinks is funny about my backside or jowls. I'll just let him lose this here case."

"You're gonna have a lot of 'splainin t' do if you go back thin," said Klaber.

"I'll say I had a faintin' spell on the road, and woke up like this," shrugged Hoxie, finally managing this ponderous effect. "Who's gonna doubt me, since there ain't no way known t' mortal man—'ceptin' us two—t' lose that much weight so fast?" Klaber still looked somewhat dubious.

"That makes sense," nodded Hoxie, eagerly, "Don't it?"

"It's your neck if they don't b'lieve you—" said Klaber.

"Right," said Hoxie. "I'll take the risks."

"But how about that boy—" said Klaber. "If I use the bug on you, he's li'ble t'—"

"You told me a week," said Hoxie, triumphantly. "You fix me good, and you still got a chance t' fix the boy before his two weeks t' live is up. Right?"

Klaber sighed and nodded despondently. "Right, Hoxie. Okay, then, you better sit down in that chair again. This'll sting a mite. Critter's got a sharp-edged mouth to it."

The opened box revealed a small gray six-legged thing that vaguely resembled a chigger. It twitched one of the short furry antennae near its blind eyes, and lifted and set down a hind leg.

"It don't smell you yet," Klaber explained. "Here, now, just dip your finger into the box, in front of the critter."

Hoxie hesitated, then slowly complied. As the stubby tip of his left forefinger touched the inside of the small cardboard drawer, the bug rose up on all six legs, and two needle-sharp red points appeared at either side of its transverse jaws. Then, faster than Hoxie could watch, the thing was hugging the soft pad of his forefinger with all six legs, and there was a short-lived sting as the fangs dug deep just below the end of the nail.

Klaber deftly lifted the box away, and then sat down in his chair again. "Feel anything yet?" he said.

"Just a quick pain," said Hoxie. "But there's an itchy feeling spreadin' up my arm."

"That's the juice I told you of," said Klaber. "When it gets all through you, the bug starts pullin' it back, and all the growth

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comes along with it." He shoved the writing table forward until its surface was just beneath the small round abdomen of the creature. "Like I said, it grows some. Don't want it breakin' in half from no support."

WHEN the spreading itch had become the universal focal point of Hoxie's mind, the bug began to grow. Slowly, though head and thorax remained the same size, the abdomen began to dilate and swell, larger and larger, with increasing speed. The bug was now like a small gray pimple on a large smooth white egg—on a billiard ball—an ostrich egg—a volley ball bladder— And finally, when its diameter was greater than that of an eiderdown pillow, and a uniform glossy white, the bug unhitched its fangs from Hoxie's finger and lay dormant atop the writing table, like an airtank with a six-legged nipple.

"That'll do it," said Klaber, moving the table away from the armchair, and starting to stroke the back of the bug, like a mother burping a baby. A few moments later, this action proved to be more than similar in appearance. The tiny jaws unhinged, distended, widened, and then the bug, as if made of highly elastic rubber, snapped backward and away from the globe that had filled its innards, and Klaber caught it, held its jaws carefully clear of his fingers, and popped it back into the matchbox once more.

The huge white globe it had encircled rolled off the table and thumped and wobbled its way over to the base of Hoxie's chair. "That boy," said Klaber to the figure in the chair, "needs me bad *now*. No point in his sufferin' another week just so's you can do quick what you could do slow by dietin'. Sorry I had to trick you, Hoxie, but I gotta do things the way I feel them."

Hoxie did not reply. A fringe of wet gray hair showed crazily above the bulging shirt collar, and the one melon-shaped arm that had not vanished up a crumpled sleeve tried weakly to flex fingers the size and shape of marshmallows. A horrible humpty-dumpty of flesh lay screaming silently within Hoxie's sweat-dampened clothing, struggling for air that would no longer pull in through the collapsed windpipe, nor could be induced to enter by the loose-hanging diaphragm within his belly.

"I told you mostly true, Hoxie," said Klaber, putting on his hat. "The last thing the body grows before birth *is* the fat that lines it. But that's not the *last* thing it grows in its development. There's more to life than the part before birth. There's the gettin' to be a growed-up man."

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Klaber slapped on his hat, said to the closed box, "Sorry to make you sick, fella. I knowed it didn't agree with you," and went out the door of the room, locking it carefully after him.

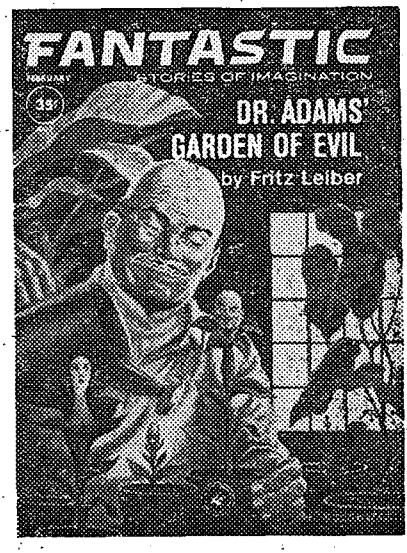
Days later, when the stench had grown intolerable, and the listless clerk had been persuaded by the other roomers to climb the stairs and investigate, they found the rotting heap of unidentifiable meat in the stained white suit in the armchair. And beside the empty shoes on the floor, they found the smooth round globe the like of which none of them had ever seen.

"Too hard for plaster," said one of the men.

When clerk and roomers attempted to lift it, it proved to weigh hardly more than thirty pounds or so, which is about right for a single-unit lumping of a fat man's bones.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH



Fritz Leiber takes charge of the February issue of FANTASTIC Magazine with a comically terrifying weirdie about a girlie magazine publisher who prefers his girls in pots—flowerpots, that is. Get your trowel and clippers and join us for a horticultural session in *Dr. Adams' Garden of Evil.*

Also in the February FANTASTIC will be **W. G. Beyer's** Fantasy Reprint, *Let 'em Eat Space,* and old-time action-adventure story; several short stories, and all our usual features.

Be sure to get the February issue of FANTASTIC at your newsstand, where it will go on sale January 22.

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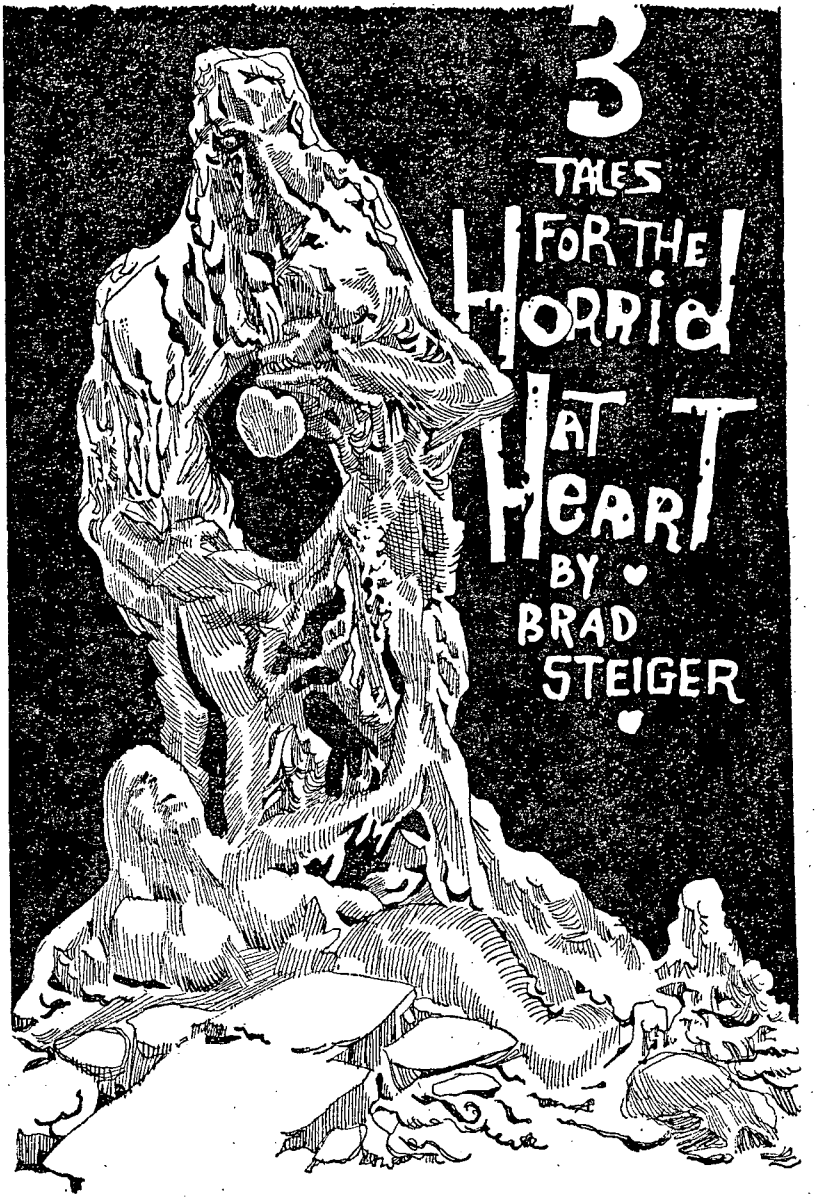

Illustrator SUMMERS

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RX: Take three traditional fantasy backgrounds . . .

Add a sprinkling of goose-pimply adverbs . . .

Stir briefly . . .

Then drop in a most unexpected ending.

Result:

Three Tales for the Horrid at Heart

RAPPORT I

I LIE chained to a bed in a lonely cabin about to embark on an experiment that will not only gain me $5,000, but do much to advance the study of extra sensory perception.

I turn my head to glance at my wrist watch. Three minutes to go. Three minutes before Karl will mentally send me the test message. I wish I had someone around to light a cigarette for me, but I agreed to the most rigorous test conditions so that I might prove to Karl the validity of mental telepathy. Consequently, I am alone in his hunting cabin, miles from anyone, chained to a metal bed, completely immobile, completely isolated from humanity until Karl has sent his message and come to release me.

The message can be anything. A passage from the Bible, a nursery rhyme, a bit of nonsense verse, or maybe something completely original. It makes no difference. I am confident of my ability to receive thought communication.

I don't mean to say that I'm able to go about reading people's minds. Hardly. But when an individual uses all the mental energy he is capable of mustering and directs his thought waves at me, I've always been able to receive the message. I've proved it. At countless parties, bars, even for Professor Rhine at Duke University under the strictest of laboratory conditions. But there's always another skeptic

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who demands inexplicable proof. Karl Henderson is such a doubter. In fact, I believe that Rose, my own wife, thinks I'm a bit of a charlatan.

That's how this little test came into being. Karl and I have known each other for years, and, of course, he's been fully aware of my study of ESP. He, as he always reminds me with puffed chest, is a practical man. Anyway, he finally got up enough nerve to bet me $5,000 that I could not receive a mental communication under the test conditions he set up.

So here I am, miles from anywhere, (I suppose Karl's under the delusion that distance will make a difference) waiting to take his message and his $5,000. Rose is to act as the judge. He will say the message aloud to her, then concentrate on the message for three minutes, after which time they shall jump in his car and drive out to the cabin to see if I have received the communique.

Ah! 3:15. Time to clear my mind of all thoughts. Prepare to attain rapport. Now. Yes.

"Well, sucker, if this telepathy jazz works, you won't be surprised when Rosie and I don't come to pick you up today. In fact, Rose and I are going away together. Like Mexico, maybe. She's decided she wants to make it with a real man for a change, instead of some crackpot. I'll see you, or what's left of you, sometime this fall when I go hunting. So long."

For just a few seconds I strain at the chains that bind me securely, then I lie still, letting the tears scald my eyes, realizing that in my victory I have found only defeat.

RAPPORT II

"WHO comes now from the spirit world?" asked the sepulchral voice of Professor Marco.

"Henry Mallet," replied a quivering mass of ectoplasm that had suddenly materialized in the darkness above the seance circle.

Pete Simpson shifted uncomfortably in his chair as Mrs. Henry Mallet tightened her grip on his left hand. Fifteen years on the racket squad had inured Simpson to such visitors from beyond. He would much rather have been home watching television. And, if he had not been so eager to prove the medium a fraud, that's exactly where he would have been.

Mrs. Mallet exchanged pleasantries with her dear departed husband, kissed at the air as he left once more for the "other side." Next there appeared a visitor for the woman on his right. Pete had been able to tell from the small trembling hand in his that the lady was a novice

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to seance theatrics. She barely managed to stifle her sobs as a child's head materialized above her right shoulder.

Simpson narrowed his eyes. This Marco was a damned clever medium. Sitting there in a semi-trance, looking fatherly with his full, dark beard, he seemed the perfect counselor for seekers of solace.

Soon everyone in the circle had received a visitor. Everyone except Simpson. Which made sense, he thought, because it was his first time in the circle and Marco hadn't received a make on him.

Then Simpson was surprised to hear: "My friend, you have not yet received a visitor. If you would tell me your loved one's name, I will try again to establish contact."

What a break! Pete had been afraid he would have to attend several dull sessions before he could get enough goods on Marco to nail him. Now the bogus professor was delivering himself like a lamb to the slaughter.

"I came, Professor Marco, to seek communion with my beloved wife, Janet," Pete said in sorrowful voice.

"I shall try my best to contact her," Mardo said.

PETE was glad for the darkness that covered his grin. The easiest way to contact Janet would be by telephone. Right now she was probably singing along with Mitch and nibbling on popcorn.

"I—I'm having some difficulty getting through," Marco said. Even in the dimness, Simpson could see veins standing out on the medium's forehead.

"Try, professor," Pete said. "Please try!" If he could get the Professor to materialize a bunch of ectoplasm (luminous gauze) that claimed to be Janet, he'd have the phoney medium and his cohorts behind bars.

The medium's breathing took on the magnitude of a bellows. Rivulets of sweat glistened in the half-light. His face twisted itself into a mask of concentrated agony.

"Try professor," Pete said, enjoying the medium's performance. "Please help me!"

Suddenly Marco's body became ramrod stiff. A scream echoed in the tomb-like seance chamber. Janet's scream!

Before Pete's eyes swirled a diaphanous figure with the features of his wife. "What have you done to me?" the figure wailed. "What have you done?"

Simpson leaped to his feet, his mouth gaping, his eyes bugging. He'd never seen anything like it!

"Don't move! Don't talk!" "Don't break the circle!" "Think of the harm you may do Profes-

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sor Marco!" Voices hissed at him from the darkness. Simpson shook his head to free it of the image of that thing with Janet's face, Janet's voice. He cursed himself for reacting so strongly to the medium's trickery. This Marco was damned good. His convincing performance had nearly caught an old cop off guard.

"Thank you, professor," he said. "You don't know how much this has meant to me."

And you don't know how much it has meant to *you,* Pete thought grimly. A command performance for the judge tomorrow afternoon.

Marco smiled feebly, mopped the sweat from his face with a black handkerchief. "My only object is to serve," he said.

You soon will be, Pete thought as he returned the smile. Serving a nice long stretch.

* * *

"I'm home, toots," Pete called as he unlocked the front door. He could hear the television in the living room. "Boy, wait'll I tell you about tonight. You were the star of the seance. This Marco character is really a performer. Almost had me . . ."

Pete Simpson crossed the living room to the easy chair in which his wife sprawled in front of the television set. She was dressed in her lounging pajamas. There was half a coke and a bowl of popcorn on the floor. On her face was a look of undecipherable horror. She was dead.

RAPPORT III

AND you claim you've seen this . . . thing walking through the graveyard, Smithers?" I ask, turning up my collar against the cold October mist.

"Yes, Carruthers," he says soberly. "It shows up just after midnight."

We're standing huddled against the side of a moss-covered crypt, trembling with cold, perhaps with fear. If this is just one of Smither's wild stories, I'll tear him apart. I'd planned to visit one of the village girls tonight.

"What do you say that it is?" I ask, offering him a cigarette from my pack. "Man, beast, or thing?"

"Man, I'm afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Well, a beast would probably be easier to handle."

I nod. "And you feel that this . . . whatever it is . . . has been responsible for the recent deaths in this vicinity?"

"I told you before, Carruthers. I've seen this fiend enter the graveyard and prowl about the crypts . . . always on the night of a murder!"

"What twisted mind could be capable of such ghastly murders?" I shudder. "Did you see

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the look on old Jake Humbert's face? And the way his chest had been caved in. . . . We're up against a monster of incredible strength."

"He's murdered all three of them at dawn while they were sleeping," Smithers says, looking apprehensively about him. "I tell you none of us are safe with that beast running loose!"

We stand a few moments in silence, smoking. Then we hear something coming. The fog is so dense we can't see for certain, but the shuffling sounds seem to be coming from the gravel road that leads into the graveyard. We grind out our cigarettes beneath nervous toes. The rusty gates squeal their protest as something forces them apart. The sounds grow louder, closer.

"My god! Look at the size of that brute!"

"Looks mean as hell!"

"But there are two of us!"

"Has he a weapon?"

"Yes. A . . . a wooden stake and a mallet!"

"Then we must strike . . . now!"

Smithers glides silently behind the big man while I appear suddenly in front of him.

"You . . . you're one of them!" the brute says in a harsh, gutteral voice.

Wild-eyed and cursing, he lunges for me with the pointed wooden stake. Then Smithers is on his back, sinking his fangs into the soft flesh of his neck. I move in to help him finish the job.

After it is all over, we stand panting heavily from our exertions . . . and our full stomachs.

"Why must there always be some damn human who still believes in us!" curses Smithers. "This murderer got three of us with his damn stake and mallet!"

THE END

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the MAN next door

By PAUL ERNST

Illustrator SUMMERS

Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

THE sophisticated fantasy, so tremendously popular not only in the fiction writing of the past 20 years, but on the television screen, is today taken for granted by the general public and science fiction audience alike. The presumption, of course, is that it has always been with us. This assumption is not true. Science fiction tales, like so many that have appeared on Twilight Zone, *where our neighbor, drinking buddy or co-worker eventually reveals he is an undercover Martian or Venusian, do not date much further back than* The Man Next Door *by Paul Ernst, which appeared in the March 4, 1939 issue of* ARGOSY.

The idea of an alien from another world prowling incognito about the land, is, of course, at least half as old as science fiction. Not only is it common in the English, but it shows up in other languages. Usually these stories are crudely done, such as A Martian on Earth *by Louis Arnoux, published in Paris in 1932, where a neighbor of the author is a visitor from the Red Planet who regales him with a monologue on the failings and foibles of the earthmen.*

The Man Next Door *by Paul Ernst is essentially the same basic idea, with a polished difference. "The Man Next Door" supplies a series of strange and seemingly inexplicable clues building up to the conclusion that he is not from this world. The shocking realization that some alien "thing" walks among men with motives inscrutable, has since been the inspiration of scores of stories. In the modern school of science fiction, the idea is used to adorn a tale not to point a moral. Kinship of this school of science fiction to ac-*

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counts of men who unknowingly descend into the depths of hell with a companion who unmasks as the Devil are obvious.

In the modern tense, the opening of the third eye of the Martian in Henry Kuttner's superb little story Don't Look Now *may signify a sinister fate for man or, as in* The Snibbs Phenomenon *by Philip Wylie, the aliens may contribute to anonymously saving the world from slavery of a totalitarian nature, in what is undoubtedly a salute to the very uncommon common man. There is no pat formula.*

There have been so many imitations of The Man Next Door *since it first appeared in 1939, that the reader may tend to regard it as another facile work in a certain vein rather than the pioneer work it actually is. Paul Ernst, previously a competent adventure science fiction writer, displayed in this tale and in a number of others before he ceased writing science fiction that he was developing into a writer of unusual ability.*

Those who read his touching story of the farm hand who wanted to fly, To Heaven Standing Up *reprinted in the November, 1961* FANTASTIC *can attest to that.* To Heaven Standing Up *was originally published in the April 5, 1941* ARGOSY. *Shortly before its appearance, he had published in the same magazine for Dec. 14, 1940, an immensely effective glimpse into the future titled* He Didn't Want Soup, *a short story with intimations of social criticism. There are probably enough others of comparable quality to someday make up at least a slim collection as a testimonial of Ernst's small but worthwhile contributions to the fantasy field.*

I

NEEDLESS to say, this part of the story was never handed in to the New York paper for which I am a reporter. I knew too well what the editor would have said. "Interesting, but hardly news, Phillips." And he'd have looked at me as if convinced I was slightly mad.

As so often happens, it broke when I wasn't out for a story at all. I was on a vacation; home for the first time in four or five months resolved not to think shop even if a volcano broke loose in our peaceful Connecticut village.

I got home about ten o'clock at night. It was January and cold. Dad, big and bearlike in an ulster, smoking his eternal pipe, met me in the comfortable old family sedan and drove me from the station in winter darkness.

"Good to see you, son." That

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was all, but the look in his eyes went beyond the reticence of his words.

"It's swell to see you, Dad. News?"

"We're all about the same, Jim. Mother's over that cold she had. Bill Wilson, the boy you used to play hockey with in the next block, married a Bridgeport girl and took her to Boston where he has a new job. Kay's still the same. The house next door has finally been sold, and the new owner got in just before I started to the station to pick you up. I saw lights there and reported to the watchman, who checked in and then came and said everything was all right, it was the new owner."

"So Kay's the same," I said. That was the most important item in his compact bulletin.

"Yes. I think she's been wondering why a newspaper reporter, whose profession is writing, seems never to extend his capability to writing personal letters."

"I've been a heel," I said. "But I have something to tell her this time that I hope she'll be interested in. I got a nice raise the first of the year."

Dad's deep-set eyes looked into mine. "She's pretty nice, Jim. Hope she takes it right."

We got near the house. I saw the house next door, that he had mentioned. It's a big, rambling, wasteful place, white, built in 1860 or thereabouts. It's a hundred yards from our house, on the fringe of town with a lot of trees between. Only now, with the trees bare, you could see the house plainly.

"Looks like the new owner is burning candles," I said, noting the uncertainty of the light shining from one of the windows. "I suppose he'll get the electricity connected in the morning. So they've finally sold the joint. It's been a white elephant to the Smythe heirs for a long time."

However, I wasn't really much interested. One huge, old-fashioned house, fully furnished, vacant for nine years, had been sold at last. So what?

THE house I was interested in was our own, white and clean-lined in an acre of yard, looking like a Christmas-card house with the snow around it.

"Kay's in with mother," said Dad. "She thought she'd like to greet the prodigal, too. You don't mind?" He said that with solemn lips and a sardonic twinkle in his eyes.

"Do *you* think I'll mind?" I said, punching him on the shoulder.

He stopped the car at the side door, and we went in.

"Jim!"

I'd forgotten how nice it is to

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have a female parent put her arms around you and remind you that you're her son.

"'Lo, Jimmy."

That was Kay, five feet nothing, red-brown of hair, warm brown of eye, solemn-lipped but with a twinkle usually in her eyes that was not unlike my father's.

"I suppose you think you'll escape the mugging epidemic," I said. 'See that mistletoe over your head."

"Where?" she said innocently, tilting her head up.

So I got her in the soft white of her throat under her chin first, and on the lips second.

We talked around, as you will when you've come home after a little absence. We got all caught up with news and intimacies. Then, more to be saying something than because I was really interested, I said:

"Wonder what kind of neighbor you've drawn out of the shuffle? The Smythes, who lived in the house next door when you bought this place, were pretty stuffy, weren't they, Dad?"

Dad nodded, and shrugged. "The new man's name is Carpenter. That's all I know. I didn't even know the place had changed hands till I sent Pete, the watchman, over to investigate the lights."

"What did Pete say Carpenter was like?"

"Pete was pretty vague. I gather that Carpenter is a very average-looking person, middle-aged, with not much to say. I don't know if he's married or not. Pete didn't see any one there but him. I suppose there's a Mrs. Carpenter, though. A bachelor wouldn't take a house that big."

"It's the reporter's nose for news," said Kay, red lips solemn and provocative. "He's home about fifteen minutes and starts investigating local doings."

"The hell with the man next door," I said. "Mom, would there be any apple pie and milk around? You know—apple pie with lots of cinnamon in it?"

"Well, perhaps," was the answer.

We got to bed about as late as you'd expect we would, and were just starting breakfast when there was a loud and hurried banging on the door. It was John Wither, sheriff, a man of forty who had been sort of elder brother to me when I first started carrying a shotgun through the fields in hunting season. He was bundled up in heavy coat and fur gloves.

"Jim," he said. "Nice to see you. I heard you were home, and thought I'd stop in about something that just broke. Thought maybe you'd want in on it."

"Swell to see you, too, John. What's the break?"

"Trouble up at Blanchad's. It

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isn't rightly in my jurisdiction, but they've sent out a broadcast for all the local law around, and I'm on my way up now."

It was on the tip of my tongue to thank him and say I guessed I wouldn't go because I was on vacation. But I didn't. Blanchard's, in case you don't already know, is a de luxe institution for neurotic and psychiatric cases. It caters to wealthy people. It is so de luxe, in fact, that they don't even whisper that it's an insane asylum—though that's precisely what it is. Trouble at Blanchard's might involve one of our best families.

"An attendant was killed," said John. "So if—"

"Be right with you!"

I went out to join him at his car, getting my left arm into my overcoat and holding some toast in my right hand. He started off fast.

"Didn't get much over the phone, Jim. One of Doc Blachard's incurables escaped. They found it out about half past seven this morning, at the same time they found the dead guard."

"Who was it that escaped?"

"Fellow by the name of Herrin."

"And he killed the guard?"

John's tone was funny. "I don't think they quite know that, Jim. Seems the attendant died in some peculiar kind of way that has 'em all stumped."

BLANCHARD'S sanatorium is about twelve miles from our town. We got there in twenty minutes or so. The place is twenty acres big, all surrounded by a high spiked fence. In the center is a thirty-five room building that was once a copper magnate's private home. There are bars over most of the windows.

We went in. There were twenty or thirty cars there. Constables and sheriffs and state police were buzzing around. Two local news correspondents of the free-lance type were there. John and I cut through the lot to Doctor Blanchard, a peppery man of sixty but without a gray hair in his black, sleek head.

"Hello, Sheriff Wither," he said. "You here too?"

John nodded soberly. "Sergeant Turney, State Police, called. Guess he wants everybody in this part of the state to work on getting your escaped . . . er, patient back again. Doctor Blanchard, Jim Phillips, reporter on the New York *Ledger*."

Blanchard nodded, and his black eyes asked that I go easy on unfavorable publicity. He was sensible, didn't try to hide anything. He came clean after a few prodding questions about the escaped man.

"His name is August Herrin. No living relatives. He is fairly well-off—lives on a trust fund set up by his father. He came

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here last May. Not what you'd call violent. He was deeply interested in astronomy. In fact, he has written several treatises on the planets, particularly Mars, that have appeared in scientific journals. We indulge our patients, here. We allowed—in fact encouraged—him to set up a quite excellent telescope for study. He spent his night at it, when the atmosphere was clear, and slept during the day."

"He sounds not only sane, but intelligent," I said.

Blanchard shrugged. "In his normal periods, he is. But now and then came an interval during which we watched him very closely. Incipient criminal insanity. He almost got an attendant once before. Highly dangerous to have him out."

"This hobby of astronomy," I said. "Did that have anything to do with his unbalance?"

Blanchard chewed his lip. "Of late I've thought it might have. And I've considered taking his telescope away from him after all. You see, he got to concentrating on Mars. All he observed was that one planet. Said he was looking for traces of life there."

"Many quite sane students specialize in some one planet or star," I retorted. "And many quite sane scientists have looked seriously for traces of life on Mars."

"But last night, just before lights out for the rest of the institution, he called the attendant nearest him and said he had just seen a tiny flash on Mars, as if some being there were trying to communicate with Earth."

"Well," I said, "many quite sane professors have thought to see just such a thing, and there have been several proposed plans for Earth to try to communicate with Mars."

He chewed his lip again. "That's why I wasn't quite sure whether or not to take his telescope away from him. Even a specialist can't be sure sometimes about the line between sane acts and unbalanced ones. . . . But that's enough about Herrin, I believe. The unfortunate attendant? He is in the left-wing reception room. There will be an autopsy. An expert is on his way up from New York, at our request. Most peculiar. . . ."

BLANCHARD went off, and John and I entered the building and turned left into the first room off the hall.

"What *is* this peculiarity that has been mentioned so much?" I wondered.

John shrugged solid shoulders. We pushed a way through white-coated Blanchard attendants, police and photographers.

At first I thought the attendant killed—at least that was the assumption—by the escaped

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Herrin, was physically unmarked. His face was in repose, and normal. There was no blood anywhere on his white uniform. His bare head was untouched by weapon of any sort. Then I saw his eyes, and felt my body cringe.

The man's eyes, wide open, were red. They were so solidly, deeply crimson that you could barely make out the pupils. They looked like dull rubies in his head.

"What on earth . . ." I exclaimed.

A state trooper standing next to me turned.

"Yeah," he said. "If you can figure that one out, you're better than we are. And look at his hair."

The dead man's hair, light blond, had a queer baked look. It was dry and stringy, as though it had been exposed to heat. The scalp showed more pinkish than it should have, carrying out the same impression of heat. And the eyes . . .

They looked as if they had been . . . cooked . . . I thought, with a slight shiver.

"You don't know what did it?" I asked the trooper.

"No. We're stymied. Haven't the faintest idea how he died. And if we can't dope it out, there's nothing to tie this guy, Herrin, in with the death except that the guard died the same night Herrin got away."

"Attendant, please!" said Blanchard, who had come in on the tail of the trooper's words. "We do not have guards here. They are attendants."

The trooper didn't even bother to shrug. I buttonholed Blanchard.

"You have a picture of Herrin, of course?"

He shook his head. "We have no rogue's gallery here. This is not a cheap institution. And no one has ever gotten out before, so that we didn't think it necessary . . ."

I mentally cursed his pomposity. "Describe him, will you?"

Blanchard parroted a description he had probably given fifty times that morning.

"Herrin is about fifty, gray-haired, average height and weight, undistinguished face. The chin is rounded and his nose is slightly curved up. Eyes gray-brown, ears a little large for his head."

"That description might apply to hundreds of men."

"Mr. Herrin is a very average looking fellow," Blanchard sighed. "I wish, now, that we had a file of pictures of our clients. I shall certainly start one immediately."

Sure. After the horse was stolen.

John Wither was about ready to go. I joined him after a last look at the dead man's still face

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—and his eyes. Red as blood. Red as fire. Like dull round rubies in a skull that somehow gave that odd impression of having been baked dry.

II

IT was about one o'clock when I got back to the house. Lunch was ready. Kay met me at the door with that announcement. Also with another announcement.

"Your new neighbor is lunching with us," she said. "I saw him wandering like a lost soul around the grounds next door, and passed the time of day with him. He looked so sort of forlorn that, on impulse, I asked him to come in. And your mother extended the luncheon invitation."

The table was set in the glass-closed porch off the dining room. It was very pleasant with the winter sun shining in. Kay and I sat on one side of the table, the new neighbor, Carpenter, sat on the other, and mother and father held down head and foot respectively.

Carpenter was a very deliberate, rather vague man with not much to say. We asked him how he liked his new place, and he said it seemed to be all right. We asked him if he intended to stay there regularly, or if he were keeping a place in town too, and he said he didn't know. He was quite pleasant but apparently one of these people who don't know the meaning of small talk.

Kay asked me about the Blanchard thing.

"There are some very curious angles," I said evasively. I didn't want to go into details. His eyes . . . It wasn't a luncheon-table conversation. "I phoned it all in. The late evening editions will have it."

"Why did they have Sheriff Wither go up?" said Kay. "Do they think perhaps the escaped man came down toward our village?"

"They don't know where he went," I said. "I guess they just wanted all local law officers to get a first-hand description and be on the lookout." I turned to Carpenter, smiling a little. "Don't get the idea that this is a usual thing in your new locale. This is the first time any one ever got away from Doc Blanchard."

Carpenter looked mildly at me, and took eight or ten seconds before replying.

"I'm sure it isn't usual," he said finally.

It was almost as though he had to search his memory for the right words. I watched him for a few minutes after that, and noticed that his actions were on the same order. Slightly delayed, I mean. He picked up a spoon, held it for two or three seconds as if trying to remember what

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you did with spoons, then put it in his coffee cup. He looked at the cup for a little while, thoughtfully, then picked it up and drank out of it. I decided that Carpenter must have just convalesced from a long illness that left him tired and fuzzy-minded.

HE LEFT about two-thirty, thanking us very formally and deliberately—as though searching for the proper words—and went across to the house next door. Watching him idly through the window, I saw him stoop and pick up a handful of snow, which he regarded for a minute or more as if snow were something very curious indeed.

"The absent-minded professor," I said.

"He seems a very nice man," Mother defended, as if I had said something slurring.

"Sure. . . ."

Wither came to the door about then, and I forgot everything else in my curiosity as to the developments of the Blanchard ruckus. John had some highly unusual news.

"They've concluded the autopsy," he said. I was out in the yard with him, not wanting the folks to hear the gruesome details. "The New York medical examiner opened up the man's brainpan to see what made his eyes and hair and scalp look like that. You know, that doc is the most completely flabbergasted guy I ever saw. There's no mark on the outside of the man's skull. But the inside—well, it looks as if somebody had turned his brains to cotton soaked with gasoline, and then lit a match to it. The skull on the inside is so seared it's charred. Looks a little as if the lymph and stuff had suddenly turned to concentrated sulphuric."

"For Pete's sake," I said.

"Yeah," said John. "Ditto. The guy's eyes and hair looked as if they'd been exposed to extreme heat. Well, they had been. From inside his head."

"That's impossible! How could . . ."

"It couldn't," said Wither. "But it was. Looks like Herrin didn't have anything to do with the guard's death, anyhow. Far as anybody can figure out, no human being could kill like that."

"Are there any theories at all?"

"A few goofy ones. Somebody said some kind of a heat ray might get such a result. But there's no machine anywhere around Blanchard's that could give out a heat ray—if there's one anywhere in the world, for that matter. Somebody else said that maybe the guy had somehow bumped a loose wire with his head, and electricity did it. But there's no exposed wires at

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the place carrying more than a hundred and ten volts, which wouldn't do things like that to the inside of a man's skull."

"Beats *me*," I said. "Anything else?"

"We know how Herrin got away," said John. "Not that it matters much, I guess. One of the troopers got hold of a woman who said she saw a strange man drive her neighbor's car away. Near Blanchard's. She reported it at the time, but the boys had something more to do than stand on their heads hunting for stolen cars. It wasn't till later that they tied the two in together, and realized that Herrin was the stranger who got away in the car.

"The woman said a kind of funny thing. She said the man didn't seem to know how to drive a car for a minute, after he got in. He started with a jerk, and wobbled down the road. But before he'd got out of sight the car was going smooth enough. It was as if he'd had to figure out how to run the thing, she said."

"Does Herrin know how to drive?"

"Sure. They asked Blanchard that. Blanchard says Herrin has owned cars all his life. So I guess the woman was mistaken, or else Herrin had kind of forgot how to drive while he was in the place, and had to take a minute to remember."

I THANKED him for letting me in on the latest details, and stepped to the corner to phone it to New York. When I got back to the house, I saw Carpenter wandering around in his backyard, so I stepped down to him instead of going directly in our place.

Carpenter had scuffed up a bit of frozen sod and earth from under the snow, and was pinching it experimentally between fingers blue with a cold to which he seemed oblivious. He nodded to me, and spoke, while looking at the frozen grass roots and earth.

"It is very"—there was a ten second interlude during which he seemed hunting for the word —"very fertile around here, isn't it?"

"Here?" I laughed. "Hardly, compared to some parts of the south and west."

"It seems extremely fertile to me. Probably it's this heat."

"You speak as though it were ninety in the shade, instead of about ten above zero," I said.

"Ninety in the shade . . . Oh, yes, I understand."

I wondered for a moment if Carpenter were a foreigner, with English that was a bit rusty but had no trace of an accent when at last he did choose his words.

"I must travel a little. But I find that I tire easily." He looked down at his own body with the oddest expression: as if it were

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a machine that had never been much good anyhow and at present was in extreme disrepair. Yes, he'd just recovered from a long illness, I decided.

"Perhaps it is simply the weight of the atmosphere," he said slowly, with a little experimental pause before finding the word, atmosphere.

"I guess we're no lower than any other part of the east coast," I said, grinning. "Go south a ways, and you'll think you've hit something, if it's a muggy day. The usual fifteen pounds per square inch pressure feels like thirty-one and a half."

"Of course, of course," said Carpenter vaguely. And even more vaguely he repeated, "I must travel a little . . ."

Mother called me from the house. "Jim. The sheriff's on the phone."

"Come on downtown. Henkel's office. You know, Henkel, the real estate man."

"What's up, John?"

"Henkel's dead. Got the same dose the guard at Doc Blanchard's got—whatever that may be. Same kind of thing. His eyes . . . His head's still hot. I think maybe we're in for some kind of an epidemic nobody ever heard of before. Or else . . ."

"Or else?" I prompted him.

"Maybe Herrin did kill that guard, in some way nobody can figure out, and is right here in town going on with the killing —starting with Henkel."

III

FOR the moment, the vacation was shot. This second thing, coming so close on the heels of the first, was too big to phone about. I decided to go into town with it. We are less than three hours drive from my office.

I commandeered the family sedan. "Back about ten," I told the folks. I dashed out. Carpenter was still wandering around his grounds. He looked so desolate, so alone and alien, that I had the kind of impulse Kay must have felt when she asked him into our house.

"I'm taking a quick run down to New York," I called. "Want to go to the city for anything? Come along, if you like."

"Oh, yes," Carpenter said, coming out to the car. "I would like to see the city."

He got in. I didn't say much for awhile. I was thinking as I drove, trying to coordinate things.

Bill Henkel, enterprsing young real estate agent, had been found dead in his office by his secretary when she came back from a late lunch. He was lying on the floor, with his telephone in his hand. In all respects he seemed to have died just like Blanchard's guard.

There was the dry, stringly

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look to his hair, and the feverish pinkness to his scalp. There were the eyes—red as fire, solidly crimson, as though they had been steamed. When they opened Henkel's skull, they were going to find the same fantastic condition they'd discovered in the guard's.

I tried a few vague theories myself. Could some one have injected powerful acid into the man's skull? But how? Henkel, and the guard too, would have had to be knocked unconscious before a thing as crazy as that could be done. And on neither man was there a mark of violence of any kind.

Would some sort of artificial fever machine, of the type used in diathermy, have induced such a terrific internal heat? But those contraptions are ponderous. No one could carry one around to use like that. And again, why would Henkel or the guard have submitted to such treatment without a struggle?

The idea of a heat ray of some kind seemed most plausible. But the generation of heat rays is, so far as I know, confined entirely to laboratory experiments that have not as yet got very far. . . .

"I don't think any of you will be able to solve it," said Carpenter, who had been sitting very still beside me.

"Eh?" I said, startled.

Later, I recalled the intonation the man had used. I don't think any of *you* will *ever* be able to solve it. He had verbally underlined the two words like that.

At the moment, however, I thought only of the rather amazing fact that Carpenter had seemed to read my mind. Then I got the plausible explanation, of course. Carpenter had been near enough back at the house to catch some of the sheriff's words to me, had known I must be thinking about them, and had put out that statement.

"Maybe not," I said, laughing a little. "It looks like it now, at any rate."

We were silent a while longer. Then Carpenter said, in a low, thoughtful tone, "Fifteen pounds to the square inch."

I WAS puzzled for a moment, then realized that he was going back to my idle mention of the average atmospheric pressure, for no reason that I could think of.

But he did an even more inexplicable thing a moment later. There was a flashlight in the pocket of the door next to his knee. He took that out and held it.

"Would this be a pound?"

"Oh, no," I said. "That would weigh less than half a pound."

He put the light back in the

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pocket, while I drove on with one eyebrow up a bit. He looked out at the snow-draped countryside we were speeding through.

"You say this is quite cold for this section?"

I was completely at sea, now, Carpenter had spoken vaguely of traveling a little more than he had.

He'd seemed to be unfamiliar with climate and topography of the south and along the east coast. Where the hell was he from, anyway? California? But even a person who had never been out of the state before would know something, from reading, about the rest of the United States, wouldn't he?

"It sometimes gets colder," I said, feeling childish, "But not much."

Such talk was more uncomfortable than no talk at all. I turned the car radio on, and settled back to listen to a good swing orchestra. Carpenter sat still as a stone beside me, but his eyes were unblinking and absorbed. Glancing sideways at him, I had the craziest impression—that he was looking through the solid metal of the dash at the chassis of the radio. But I knocked myself out of that fool notion in a hurry. Damn it, Carpenter was giving me the jitters with his asinine questions and queer looks. I was sorry I'd invited him along.

I turned from the orchestra to a political talk. But suddenly words besides those of the speaker seemed to come to me, barely audible.

"Ours must have been like that, in the beginning, long ago, Crude . . . rudimentary. . . ."

I had stared at Carpenter before the words were done. Stared in amazement. I was sure Id caught those words. And, if so, Carpenter must have spoken them. But the man's lips were not moving! They were a straight, still line in his face.

Looking straight ahead at the road, and feeling a little chill touch the base of my spine, I said, "They'll be broadcasting power over these things soon. We won't need motors in our cars. We'll get power from a central broadcasting station."

"Of course," said Carpenter, simply, as if agreeing with a statement so self-evident that it needed no agreement. "You will broadcast more than power some day."

"Oh?" I said, feeling resentful somehow at his calm cocksureness. "What else would be broadcast?"

His eyes flicked quickly to my face.

"Thought, for one thing," he said, as if experimenting with me, playing for reaction. "Thought—and perhaps intelligence itself."

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"You mean maybe a person's mind can be broadcast over a distance by something like radio?" I said, staring and then laughing. "Don't be absurd!"

"Mind, intelligence, soul, thought," Carpenter said, with a little pause before each word, as though searching his memory for it. "They're all about the same, aren't they? Without substance, as electric power and radio energy are without substance. Hence, able to be broadcast."

THE conversation was getting utterly mad. But it was sort of interesting.

"What kind of receiving set would you rig up to receive the broadcast of an intelligence, or soul?" I grinned.

Carpenter didn't grin back. With all the seriousness in the world, he seemed to turn the problem over in his mind. As if it were a practical, hard question that must be settled right now.

"That," he said, "is—I mean, would be—the difficulty. To broadcast an intelligence? Comparatively simple. To receive it? Extremely intricate. An intelligence must have a material conductor, just as electrical energy, to accomplish tangible results, must have metal to course through. An intelligence, to mean anything, must have a body. A 'receiver,' as you put it. So, now, an intelligence is broadcast, on a narrow beam toward a limited section. The person in that limited section whose concentration on the section from which the broadcast is being made is most intense, will be apt, whether he cares for it or not, to become the receiver."

"It looks to me," I said, "as if you were patching together a fine example of dual personality. The guy on the receiving end already has one intelligence—his own. Now you put another mind in his body. So then what?"

Carpenter looked as if he were beginning to tire of the game.

"The broadcast intelligence would rule as the stronger. The other? Perhaps it would lie dormant, perhaps be driven forth, disembodied, I don't know." He frowned a little at the thickening buildings just north of the city. "How slow. What a crawling pace."

"Say, I'm doing fifty," I said, nettled. "That's not bad on a slippery road with traffic around."

I was completely annoyed with friend Carpenter by now. I suspected he was kidding the daylights out of me. We went along in silence, into town, through clanging outer streets toward Uptown Manhattan. Traffic hit its worst in the icy streets. Drivers took insane chances to gain

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ten feet in space and ten seconds in time. Pedestrians tried earnestly to commit suicide by crossing against lights and in the middle of the block. Horns hooted for no reason except to express their owners' futile impatience.

I thought I caught words again—though again when I glanced in surprise at Carpenter I saw that his lips were not moving.

"And they thought *me* dull, fit only for experiment."

"What?" I said to Carpenter, yelling over the traffic din.

He shook his head, as if to indicate that he had said nothing. I put everything out of my mind but the wheel. Driving in New York's rush hour is a full-time job.

"Where shall I let you off?" I said.

"What?" he said.

"Where do you want to go?"

"I have no place particular in mind," he said placidly. "I'll wait in the automobile for you when you stop."

"I might be gone an hour," I shrugged.

"That will be all right."

I PARKED, finally, near the newspaper building and went on up to the editor's desk. Warburton, at the desk, said something no one had ever heard him say before.

"I don't know how to handle this story, Jim."

I said nothing. I hadn't known how to handle it, either.

"Nothing known can make a man die the way you say Henkel and that guard died. . . . You're sure you got it all straight?"

"I saw both of 'em, after they were dead," I said.

"We've got to put out a theory, at least," Warburton said plaintively. "Otherwise the whole state of Connecticut will go balmy. A crazy man at large with some new method of killing perhaps from a distance! I don't want to start a panic. Maybe acid was somehow shot into their skulls—"

"I thought of that," I said. "It might produce about those results. But no trace of acid was turned up at the autopsy of the guard. And there would be traces if such a thing had been used."

I put Warburton up to date, while he chewed the wire end of his green eyeshade. Then I went back to the car.

Carpenter was in the front seat completely surrounded by newspapers. Apparently he had bought one of each edition on the big stand a hundred yards from where I'd parked.

I got in with a rather curt nod. He piled the papers in the back of the sedan. I started north, toward home.

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"I've read your news pages," he ventured. "They seem very complete. There are a lot of wars going on, aren't there?"

"Bigger and better every year," I said morosely. I had him pegged now, I thought. He was from some obscure foreign land, perfectly in command of our language, but with a highly alien point of view. An educated Eskimo might talk as Carpenter talked.

"Since they are so busy destroying themselves, it should mean little to them if they were faced with wholesale destruction from an outer source."

"Now is that nice?" I said.

"I beg your pardon," he said politely.

"Didn't you say something—" I stopped in confusion. What the hell! Was I hearing things? Or dreaming them in some subconscious section of what I regard as my mind?

IT GOT to be after nine o'clock. I was hungry and a little cold and looking forward to a late dinner at home. I didn't say much. Neither did the curious man beside me. I thought he was sleeping, and I felt drowsy myself, with home about fifteen miles away and the motor purring smoothly. Then I had the oddest feeling.

It grew on me slowly. From being drowsy, I became more and more tense and vibrant. I had the sensation you get sometimes in summer when an electrical storm is on the verge of breaking around you in full force: when your body is so susceptible to static electricity that every little hair on your skin seems to crackle with a faint discharge.

The feeling lasted for perhaps three minutes, coming to a climax so uncomfortable that I shifted in my seat and felt itchy all over.

After that, abruptly, it stopped. I stared at Carpenter. He had his eyes closed and seemed utterly still and relaxed. Whatever had caused my queer sensory experience had apparently left him untouched. I decided I was just nervous because I'd gone without a meal.

Twenty-five minutes later, at about a quarter of ten, we drew up in front of Carpenter's gate.

"Thank you very much," he said, "for taking me to the city."

"You're welcome." I wanted to get warmed and fed. I drove on to our own gate and went in.

And the first person to meet me as I entered our door was John Wither, Sheriff.

"Jim," he said, "more trouble."

"You mean—like Henkel?" I had to force the words out.

He nodded. "Old Pete, the watchman. Only a little way

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from here. Over in the backyard of the next place, in fact. He couldn't have been dead more than half an hour when I found him. Mrs. Newman, four houses down the line, said she saw him pass at a quarter past nine. It must have been about five minutes after that . . ."

"In Carpenter's backyard!" I said. "That is close!"

"Very. Now, nobody knows much about this neighbor of yours, Carpenter—"

"Wait, John. You're on the wrong tack. Carpenter was with me a half hour ago. In fact he has been with me all afternoon and evening. He went to New York with me."

"Hell!" said John, after a moment. "That clears him, at least, doesn't it? Well, keep your eyes peeled, Jimmy. If you see Herrin, call me fast."

I thought of dead men with their eyes heat-reddened like dull rubies in their skulls, and with brains that looked—what was John's description?—as if some one had turned them to cotton soaked in gasoline and set a match to them.

"I'll keep my eyes peeled, all right," I said fervently.

IV

I DIDN'T taste my belated dinner much. After it, I was abstracted. Not that it mattered any. There wasn't much said. The death of old Pete, right next door, weighed heavily on us.

At about eleven Kay said she thought she'd go home. I put on hat and coat and gloves to walk the three blocks with her.

"What's on your mind, Jim?" she asked. "Pete's—death?"

"Naturally," I said. That, and the indication it gives that Blanchard's escaped lunatic is so near."

But I was evading when I said that. These things were on my mind, of course. But there was more than that pressing me down. Only I couldn't discover just what it was.

My mind felt heavy, foggy, depressed. Yet under that, like lightning under fog, was a queer, breathless excitement. Thinking of Pete? Yes, certainly. And of Henkel and the guard. But in addition, my subconscious mind was trying to steer conscious thought in another channel, too. Something odd, something fantastic, something colossal, which was almost but not quite added up from many small facts thrown at me one by one.

I was back at our gate before I thought definitely of Carpenter. That curious person . . . I didn't go in. Went on, for a turn around the block, with the suppressed and seemingly reasonless excitement swelling within me.

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Curious man. The winter cold had seemed warm to him. How he had dwelt on the simple fact that the pressure of earth's atmosphere is roughly fifteen pounds per square inch! Hefting the flashlight and saying tentatively, "Would this be a pound?" As if he didn't know what a pound was!

Scuffing up frozen turf and remarking that the earth seemed very fertile. Scrutinizing snow as if he had never seen it before. Like a native of some far-off, backward country. . . . Yet he had thought my fast driving into New York very slow. A crawl, he had called it. Inhabitants of backward countries would hardly be used to more speed than that. Nor would they be able to converse so fantastically about the possibilities of radio—

MY mind came to such a full stop that my body did too. Standing stonestill on the sidewalk in the January night I stared ahead as if at phantoms. The reasonless excitement deep down in my mind seemed to grow abruptly to suffocating proportions.

Staring at the car radio he had said, "Ours must have been like that, in the beginning, long ago. Crude . . . rudimentary."

But wait a minute! He had not *said* that. He couldn't have. I'd been watching his lips—and they hadn't moved. You can't read a thought that completely, word for word. It's impossible. Yet—it seemed I had.

"Thought, for one thing, might be broadcast," he had said. "Thought—and perhaps intelligence itself."

And later—"Mind, intelligence, soul, thought. They are all about the same. Without substance, as electric power and radio energy are without substance. Hence able to be broadcast."

I was leaning against a tree now, feeling literally weak in the knees. My heart was pounding in my throat as if my body were suddenly too small for it.

"To broadcast an intelligence? Comparatively simple. To receive it? Extremely intricate. An intelligence must have a material conductor . . . a body. A 'receiver,' as you put it. Say an intelligence is broadcast on a narrow beam toward a limited section. The person in that limited section concentrating the hardest on the section from which the broadcast is being made will be apt, whether he care for it or not, *to become the receiver.*"

"Good god," I whispered into the night. I was walking again, moving, where I did not notice or care.

Small facts adding up labori-

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ously and slowly into a total never seen on earth before.

August Herrin, escaped lunatic from Blanchard's, mingling insanity with lucid periods in which he was a quite competent astronomer. Specializing on Mars. Studying Mars only a few hours before he mysteriously escaped. Reporting crazily that he had thought to see a tiny flash from the red planet.

A guard killed by something impossibly like a heat ray. Henkel killed. The watchman killed . . .

Pete had been killed about a half hour before I got home. And what had happened at that time with the man, Carpenter, sitting utterly still and with eyes closed beside me, I had felt as though bathed in the kind of static electricity that precedes a violent summer storm. Though this was winter—January. At the very moment, as near as could be figured out, in which Pete had met his death. . . .

A GATE had clicked behind me a little while ago. I had scarcely heard it, and not noticed. But I did now. For now I found myself standing at a door with my hand on the knob.

The back door of the house next to ours. How had I got there? I didn't know. But I did know that I didn't want to go in. I wanted to run, yelling for the sheriff and all the men he could gather. I wanted to get machine guns, gas bombs, every weapon the mind of man has figured out.

I didn't want to go in that house. I willed myself not to. I stood there, sweating in the icy night. And my hands, as if belonging to some one else, turned the knob and opened the door. There wasn't even a hesitation about the move.

I walked forward through a dark kitchen. There was no hesitation about that move, either; as if drawn on a string, I went straight through to the hall, down that, and to the front room of the place.

Carpenter was in there, seated at a table. The room was lit by two nearly spent candles. It was as cold as the temperature outside. Neither heat nor light had been turned on by this man we had spoken of as the new owner of the old Smythe place. He was livid with cold, but paid it no attention whatever. It was as though his body were of no concern at all to him—any more than if it had belonged to some one else.

He said nothing for a moment, just sat there staring at me out of a white, expressionless face. I stood in front of him, crazed with the instinct to race away, and unable to move a muscle.

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After quite a long time he said, "You have guessed."

I nodded: Henkel had died because, as real estate agent he handled this property. When it was reported that the house was tenanted, he thought it odd that he had received no word from the owners. He had been about to telephone about it when stricken. Pete had evidently found something during his rounds indicating that all was not well here.

Now I stood before this figure with the white face, terrible in its calm and impersonality. And I knew far more than either Henkel or Pete. I was utterly helpless.

And then it started. My head felt hot. It was a thing almost indescribable. A needle-point of heat seemed to have become buried in the center of my head, just over the roof of my mouth. It grew in intensity, then suddenly, it stopped.

"No, I won't kill you. It isn't necessary. I am going anyhow."

"You . . . you will be back, though? You, and millions more like you?"

"No." The eyes in the white face had grown normal again. And dull and tired. "It would be so easy. Mankind is divided and bickering. Weak and ineffectual. And it is so beautiful—and rich—here. But two things prevent. Atmospheric pressure and the relatively intense heat. Too much effort would be required to insulate us against the crushing pressure and the heat till evolution could adapt our race."

"Unless all came as you did? Projected intelligences taking over the earthly bodies?"

The seated figure shook its head, dull, morose, baffled.

"Experiment has proved that an alien intelligence cannot be transmitted through the experience of birth. With earth bodies, we would beget earthlings, dying out in a single generation as far as our own race consciousness and wisdom could know. . . . Such is the report I am forced to make to my superiors."

Not in one single line did the seated figure change. The face was white and still as it had been before. But the hands stirred restlessly and into the nondescript, gray-brown eyes of the man I had known as Carpenter, came such a different look that it was as if they had been turned abruptly into the eyes of another man.

"Why is it so cold?" he said. Even his voice was different: peevish, vacillating.

August Herrin looked around. "What room is this? I don't recall a room like this on the grounds. Where am I? Where is Doctor Blanchard? Where is my telescope?"

THE END

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the FORELIFE

Illustrator COYE

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MYTH

By ALBERT TEICHNER

In the white plaza the
figures suddenly
sparked into existence.
And the old man
and the young girl
wondered anew
about the truth of legend.

SEER Wirther had been lecturing for several hours to his students on *Some Methods of Moving Toward Eternity* when a young female rose in the back tier and said, "Seer, you have given us much interesting, useful information for the future of our souls, whatever they may be, but—."

Here she glanced uneasily at the rows of ghostly faces tipped upward toward her and, in turn, the wise one looked beningly down at her. "Yes, Miss Tarns?"

"Well," she resumed hastily as if speed would prevent them from reacting overstrongly to her words, "well, you haven't said a word about our *pasts*, about why across the ages there have been rumors of *people* from whom we may have sprung."

Everyone snickered and some

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students even guffawed their contempt for such a notion, but Wirther preserved his scholarly demeanor.

"Your fellow students should not laugh so heartily, Miss Tarns. Undoubtedly most of them have believed—or half-believed—this ancient myth at one time or another. However, it does remain a myth, and more most frequently babbled by the senile just before they pass from this world."

Miss Tarns remained standing. "Isn't that a sheerly negative approach, Seer Wirther? I mean, hardly anybody ever takes seriously the question of our origins, where we came from. Isn't there a mystery to it?" Some of the students wriggled about uneasily and had to snicker themselves back into a mood of relaxed comfort. "Suddenly we're here in the world, some large, some small, some highly articulate, some incoherent and waiting to be educated. Don't you ever wonder about how it happened?"

The Seer was all good-natured tolerance. "There's an important branch of philosophy, Miss Tarns, that concerns itself with unanswerable problems like that one. It has shown, in every case, that these are pseudo-problems because they are based on pseudo-questions. In other words, if a question means nothing, the answer will be just as empty." He tented his hands over the lectern. "We don't come from anywhere. We merely, all of a sudden, happen, have existence, and grow from that beginning through this life, then move on to the unseeable next one."

"All right, suppose I reverse that?" Miss Tarns set her jaw determinedly.

"Reverse it?"

"Yes. I could say we come from a previous life and there is none after ghostness is past!"

"You can't say that!" "Heresy!" "You *shouldn't* say that!" The whole class had sprung to noisy life, each student offering a different reason for objecting.

"We will try to disregard your last remark," the Seer informed her. "Now then, has anyone present ever been in a haunted place, ever *seen* a human person?"

Once more there was uneasiness. But this time the uneasy ones did not laugh.

"Have you, Miss Tarns?"

"Uh—well, not exactly."

"Not exactly. Not exactly." Wirther rolled the words in his mouth like a slowly melting confection. Suddenly he whirled to face another quarter of the hall, long cloak swirling with the movement, and pointed toward a young man who had risen to speak. "Yes, Mr. Staw. Have you managed to see one?"

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"Oh no, Seer, not at all." Staw shuffled his right foot back and forth, somewhat abashed. When he had overcome his embarrassment he went on. "I just wanted to show Miss Tarns the error of this superstition."

SHE had been gazing interestedly across the room at him but now all respect disappeared. "I resent being called superstitious by a student of my own level."

He retreated a little. "I'm sorry if it sounded that way."

"It did. It does."

"Well, what I meant was that I could prove the widespread belief—you see, Miss Tarns, I am saying belief for your sake, not superstition—I could prove it to be unscientific and therefore in error."

"Go ahead, young man," Wirther nodded, amused.

Staw held out his hand. "Here is a solid part of my being, a hand. It exists in a five-dimensioned manifold, three of space, two of time. This is the only dimension manifold in which it could exist until we achieve some Afterlife. Right, Miss Tarns?"

Her glance had once more softened toward him. "I agree, Mr. Staw. So far."

"Good. Now here is the back of a chair in front of me. I tighten my fingers on it and they find resistance in its solidity. They do not pass through this matter. Now then, can stories of 'people' be true?" Excited by the iron-clad strength of his evidence, he plunged on without waiting for an answer. "In such stories we always hear about someone—almost never the storyteller but someone else—suddenly seeing buildings and landscapes and corridors somewhat like our own except that these 'things' pass *through* the things of our world! And, to crown it all, this someone else has also seen frightening 'people,' beings somewhat like us in outline, beings supposedly our ancestors, who pass right through our walls, even through us ourselves! How can something of five dimensions pass through this chairback or this hand?"

"Right!" the other students shouted. "There's your answer!"

"I—I don't know, of course. It's just that there has to be something to it if there have been such stories since the beginning of recorded history and —and—." She abruptly sat down, her frustration exceeded only by her sense of defeat.

Looking equally defeated—if for different reasons—Staw sat down also and Seer Wirther said, "Your refutation of Miss Tarns' contention is an effective one, Mr. Staw, but I chose to avoid that sort of contention since I wished to show that the

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argument against 'people' can be successfully made in logical terms alone without referring to physical reality. It is now, I believe, time for class to be dismissed."

Already starting to forget what they had just heard, the other students hurried out but Tarns held back in the hope of avoiding some offhanded sarcasms from any of them. One other ghost, though, remained, a man much too old to be a student, who had slipped up to the lectern and was now engaged in a sibilantly-whispered debate with Wirther. Shrugging, Tarns gave up all attempts at overhearing them once the tiers had emptied out and herself hurried into the hall. There she bumped squarely into Staw who was waiting for her.

"I don't have anything to say to you," she snapped, tossing her head.

"Sure you do," he pleaded. "Whatever disagreements we have in the classroom, we can still be good friends outside it, can't we?"

"That is what you choose to think. For my part, I don't like being made fun of in front of everybody."

He firmly grasped her shoulder. "There wasn't any making fun about it. I just didn't want you to go on talking until a lot of students started hollering you must be a silly superstitionist."

"I may be silly, that's for you to decide, but I've never been superstitious." She tried to break loose from him without success.

"Of course, you haven't been. I'm only trying to protect you from slanderous reactions." He pulled his hand away. "I'd think you'd be grateful for it, not ripping away at me."

"All right," she relented. "Still friends even though your arguments were all beside the point."

HE started to answer but was saved from the danger of renewed hostilities by the appearance of Seer Wirther. He was coming down the corridor with the elderly man. They had both tucked up their academic robes, glistening a high white which seemed twice as bright as the average layman's, and were attacking each other so vociferously that the two youngsters were passed unnoticed.

"Lorwyn, I'm always pleased to have distinguished guests sit in on my classes," Wirther was saying, "but I never expected a mathematician, a rigorous thinker, to show the slightest interest —and favorable interest at that! —in idle superstition."

"Wirther, I used to wonder precisely how presumptuous the philosophical mind could get. Now you've shown me!"

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They were moving slowly away from the students, still absorbed in each other's fallacious reasonings. "Lorwyn, facts are facts—you were the very man who once refuted the probability statistics 'proving' our minds had supersensory capacities, could even contact a mythical past existence supposed to be as real as our future one. Is that part of my presuming?"

"Not at all," he said, rocking his long, bony head up and down. "I don't believe in logical proofs of the supernatural and whenever I come across such falsified logic I fight it. But you can't logically prove such things don't exist either. The question of a previous life is a religious one—so is that of reported 'people' sightings. They're matters of belief based on unexplainable experiences, even on sheer faith. Logic is totally beside the point in this area."

"It certainly has nothing to do with *your* beliefs," shouted the Seer as they went into his office, slamming the door behind them.

Staw gaped, unbelieving. "That was Lorwyn—do you have any idea who he is?"

"I've heard vaguely of him, something to do with mathematics. I hope you noticed *he* wasn't so cocksure against human people."

"Something to do with math—? Why, he's one of the very greatest math-men! Imagine, even great thinkers can have crazy lapses!"

"Not crazy at all." The beautiful bones of her face shone triumphantly through the thin skin. "We supernaturalists can't all be such fools if a Lorwyn thinks there might be something to hauntings."

They were now passing the door to Wirther's office. Staw hesitated as he heard protesting shouts intermixed with friendly laughter coming from within. But it was now her turn to give a condescending smile and he hurried along before she could call him a chronic eavesdropper.

Outside, the sun in all its watery radiance was casting a rich pall of whiteness over the city. The youthful couple stood for a while at the head of the university's great flight of steps, gazing over the vast square and low roofs beyond to the almost transparent, gold-hued cupola of the Funerarium that dominated the city's horizon in that quarter. This was where the bodies of the dead were evaporated for release into the certain but unfathomable realities of the Afterworld. Staw's intent gaze seemed to be saying, 'There, there's the proof nothing could be more grossly substantial than we are in this life.' And Tarns' eyes, turning toward his, seemed to answer, 'It makes me wonder why, if we

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are so much more thickly physical than the Afterworld's inhabitants, why can't there be creatures even more grossly constructed than us?'

AS they spoke silently to each other, there was an equally soundless *Splink!* of light at one of the nearer corners of the square and, on the edge of an instant, an elderly woman was standing there. Then sparks of light were breaking through all about her, like exploding firecrackers seen at too great a distance to be heard, and other living ghostlings, hewn from God's void, sprang up around the first.

"Two little boys!" Tarns exclaimed, close to ecstasy at the beauty of the birthing moment.

"And three erect young men!" Staw joined in. "And a young woman holding a baby!"

"I've only seen it happen twice," Tarns sighed. "And each time there was just one person."

"Beautiful, beautiful," said someone behind them and they turned to find Lorwyn standing there. "I'm a very old man and I've seen a few cases where they appeared in a large group as well as hundreds where a lone ghostling came into being—look, thirty-four of them now!—but it's always beautiful. What can be more wonderful than the appearance of new inhabitants in our world?"

"And more mysterious," the young woman said, staring in awe as the group gathered itself together and turned off from the plaza area, already instinctually aware of the right way to go to reach the place of initial indoctrination. As the last back, that of a small girl, disappeared around a vaulting balustrade, Tarns smiled at the younger of her two companions. "Don't you find it the least bit mysterious?"

"No, not really," he answered. "In fact, not at all. Wonderful? Yes. But mysterious? No! This is just how we come into the world. Whatever is *is* and that's that. You don't have to scurry around after a supernatural explanation when no explanation is needed."

"Ah!" Lorwyn grinned. "Now I recognize the two of you, the debaters in the classroom. Good to see young minds biting off more than they can chew. You know, you two got me into a rip-snorting debate with my old friend."

"I know," Staw said, then looked embarrassed. "I mean we couldn't help overhearing a little of your discussion with Seer Wirther—."

"No need to apologize, ghostling—."

Staw looked hurt. "I'm not really all that young, Dr. Lorwyn. I appeared as a child and have had a long growth process.

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Whereas Miss Tarns here appeared only two suncycles ago, partly matured at birth."

"Sorry if I offended either of you. I'm so old—when I appeared I was already very old—well, I'm so antiquated that *everybody* looks ghostling young to me."

As soon as they exchanged introductions, Tarns launched into a statement of principles, hardly pausing for intakes of air. "I was so proud to see someone of your intellectual standing, Dr. Lorwyn, agreeing with what I said and showing the 'pure' reasoners where they've overdone their skinny faith by refusing to recognize there must be a Forelife in which living beings—yes, the people of supposed myths!—reach various levels, then pass on to us, and in a glorious case like the one we just saw some particular disaster of that life may send them on to us in one lot and—."

"Wait, wait, young lady," Lorwyn broke in. "I didn't say I *believed* in the existence of people."

"There you are," Staw chortled, "I knew nobody of your intelligence could swallow any of that."

"Another presuming would-be philosopher," the old man snapped. "I didn't say they are mythical either. I merely indicated we should keep an open mind on the matter. There have been many cases of reputable people claiming to have seen them haunting us and even to have received meaningful emanations from them."

"There *you* are!" she came back at her fellow student. "Reputable people—."

"Of course," Lorwyn went on, "they could have been mistaken. Many explanations have been offered for such phenomena—mental breakdown, tricks of light, deliberate trickery imposed on the viewers and so forth." He considered their expressions, both of disappointment now, with amusement. "An open mind, I see, doesn't always spread happiness before it!"

She disregarded the attempt to lighten the atmosphere and started down the steps, forcing the men to follow her if they wanted to continue the discussion to a cleancut conclusion. "My theory could begin to explain a lot of things. We would no longer need the ether-void to account for the birthing moment of all ghosts. We could describe why ghostlings appear at different stages of development. Plenty of oddities would have explanations."

"What, for example?" Staw laughed.

She hesitated but went on as soon as she saw the older man

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also was grinning skeptically. "All right, what about male and female?"

"Well, what about it?"

"Why does every ghostling appear on one side of the sexual line or another. Why two sexes?"

"But the reason is obvious," said Lorwyn. "Some ghosts are male to supply the logical, factual emphasis to our society, some female to cement it into a workable oneness with superior capacities for affection and general intuitive emotion."

"In this life, yes," she said impatiently. "But in the Forelife there could have been some other reason."

They both looked shocked at her. "This sort of loose reasoning simply won't do, young lady," Lorwyn exclaimed. "There is no mystery about sex. It serves exactly the natural purpose I stated, nothing more or less. What other purpose could it possibly have served in a Forelife, if there is such a life?"

For a moment she was genuinely bewildered and had to confess, "I haven't the slightest idea." But then her confidence returned. "I just have the feeling, the very strong feeling, that it served some other purpose back there that we'll never be able to imagine. Plenty of reasons for things must exist that we'll never be able even to imagine."

They were now at the bottom of the steps and started to move across the square. "I must continue this discussion with you, young lady—now. My original intention was to go home and relax but I can't let someone drift around in such a haze of misconceptions. You, it turns out, are even more dogmatic than your friend!" Despite his age he increased his pace, moving ahead of them, and they remained at a respectful distance behind since it was obvious he wanted some time to think by himself. When they reached the other side of the great plaza he stopped to let them catch up.

WHY do you insist on explaining *everything* with supernatural causes?" he suddenly demanded.

"I—I would never go that far," she stuttered.

"You seem to, Miss Tarns. You cannot remain satisfied with your hypothesis that we spring from a world of people, whatever they are. No, you must use it to account for *every* natural thing about us. Sex is so obviously, so naturally, a purely psychological phenomenon, yet you must make it spring from something else that is not itself proven to a certainty!"

"I only chose that as an example," she retreated, "an example of how all our thinking

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could be affected by acceptance of Forelife."

He gestured toward a narrow roadway and they followed him up the alley between tall buildings that cast decreasingly pale shadows as they moved deeper into it. "The shortest way to the park," he said. "We can sit down there and really thrash everything out."

"What I'd like to know is what 'people' sighting stories really tell us," Staw broke in. "What, for example, are the conditions of alleged sightings? Where do they most frequently take place?"

"All sorts of conditions," she said before more questions could be strung onto those two. "Usually the sighter is alone when it happens but sometimes there are a few ghosts together who catch a glimpse of the haunting. Observers usually report seeing something like us yet at the same time different, of some different order of matter and differently dressed. As for places, you know as well as I do that they're reported in all kinds of settings. Why shouldn't they be, don't we have birth moments take place in all kinds of places, not just the central plaza?"

"Aha!" the old man pounced. "You reveal your thought processes so overcompletely! Right away you have to subordinate a natural phenomenon, the birth process of our species, with a supernatural one, the appearance of 'people' in, allegedly, all sorts of places in *our* world!"

She tried to control her mounting exasperation. "Dr. Lorwyn, whose side are you on in this matter?" They turned a bend into a more deeply shadowed area. "I assumed you agreed with me. Now, though, you keep picking away at everything I say!"

His smile was all tolerant sagacity. "I am not on any 'side,' as you put it. I just say we should all keep an open mind. Once when I was but a few turns around the sun past my birthing I thought I experienced a people sighting but soon came to realize it had been in a dream. It taught me, though, to be more objective about the *possibility*—."

"I want to know," she demanded, "whether you believe in the existence of people or not!"

"There's much to be said on the one hand," he wavered, "and much to be said on the other too."

Now the younger man was impatient too. "You must *tend* one way or the other, though."

"Ah youth," he smiled, "youth always believes a definite answer is possible to any question."

"Why not?" she said crisply. "All I want to know is—and Mr.

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Staw does too, evidently—which way you'd lean if you had to make a choice?"

"I don't particularly care to make a choice—."

"But there's no such thing as being *completely* impartial on an important issue, not for a living being!"

Her last remark stung him a little and he said quickly in a low, confessional voice, "Well, if I had to make a choice, I'd have to say I tend to the belief that Forelife people do not exist."

"Ah, good!" Staw exulted.

"I only say tend, you understand—."

He stopped, jaw dangling in unaccustomed horror, and his young companions froze, too, in their tracks. Directly ahead of them a room-sized elongated box of darkness lay across the alley's shadows which were alabaster white in comparison and this box seemed to extend right through the walls on each side, visible through the walls to its own farthest limits.

A ROOM of sheer void but now permitting lighter patches to half-emerge like an impossible birthing that would never completely happen but leave pieces sticking into natural reality while the greater part remained in the womb of nothingness. But one small patch became still more distinct. It seemed to be a translucent material on which little figures were moving, figures that were indistinct but looked almost like ordinary ghosts except for their size and strange styles of movement and dress.

Then a much larger patch at the other end of the box lightened and the figures were explained. Seated, facing the translucent material, were something like a man and woman and, for some strange reason, the man had an arm tightly around the woman as they watched the varying translucency surface. Oddly dressed and strange in their movements, too, they were too unghostly to be believed, yet there they were, just like the people so often reported, so seldom seen, and these large people made understandable what the smaller ones on the translucent screen were and—

Miss Tarns' face glowed its deepest fright and she managed one chilling scream before her jaw froze in its open position. Both men started to say something comforting but the alien horror froze them, too.

And then the people of the black box seemed, in return, to be considering them with equal horror, eyes wide, smudgy-complected faces deeper than ever into visible darkness! The moment itself froze within some unit of time more basic than any

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of them could know. After which normal time returned and the room box *Splunked!* out of existence.

They blinked into the normal shadowiness of the alley and slowly came back to life. "No, say nothing now." Lorwyn rubbed his eyes and sighed. "Nothing. I know you saw what I did but we have to keep our minds clear of entanglements and not lose one bit of the experience. Follow me."

Even as he gave one last glance at the empty space between the walls, he swung around and started down the alley. They came round the bend and could see the square looming up ahead, all glowing whiteness, with the great flight of stairs to the university beyond it. Nothing had to be said about where they were going.

When they finally started up the steps Staw had to mutter under his breath, "Impossible, it couldn't be!" and Tarns answered, "But it was, it was!" while Lorwyn grimly shook his head for silence.

Then they were back in the building they had left a mere half hour before and standing by the door that led into Seer Wirther's office suite. Lorwyn knocked and the Seer looked happily surprised as they entered. "What," he roared, "all my argumentative friends in one batch! Did you come together?"

"We've already met," Lorwyn muttered, tightening his fists until the last hint of a shiver disappeared from them. "Something—,"

"It proves—," she broke in.

"Must be explanation—," Staw in turn exclaimed.

"No, please, young people, let me, the more objective one, tell the story. Wirther, you've known me a long time, you know I can be objective."

"Yes, certainly."

"Well, you also know the parkward alley across the square. We were just in it and we *saw* something, *the* thing!" Once more restraining the youngsters from interrupting, he went through the episode in minutest detail. Every once in a while the Seer gave a disbelieving tsk-tsk but Lorwyn went right on. It took over fifteen minutes for him to describe every bit of what he remembered.

YOU'VE told me everything possible about your alleged sighting, Lorwyn, except one thing. From all you've said I cannot tell how long all this took to happen. In fact, I'm more confused on that point than if your documentation had been briefer."

"Why, there's nothing odd about that, Wirther. It was all in a split flash."

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"There you are," Wirther said.

"What do you mean, 'There you are'?"

"In such a brief time your conscious mind could not absorb so much information, now could it?"

"That's right," Staw slowly nodded. "Something's wrong—."

"Not necessarily," said Lorwyn. "Ordinary time seemed to be beside the point. It was the briefest second of *our* time but there seemed to be some superior time scale at work that controlled both the people inside the vision and us."

"Excellent, excellent," Wirther said soothingly. "Let me approach the matter from another angle. Mr. Staw, did you seem to observe what Dr. Lorwyn has just described?"

The younger man hesitated, then grudgingly said, "It seemed exactly the same to me."

The Seer shrugged off his brief disappointment. "What about you, Miss Tarns."

"It *was* exactly the same to me!"

"There you are," he repeated. "After this supposed vision the three of you discussed—."

"We didn't," Lorwyn insisted earnestly. "Look, Wirther, I'm as eager as you are to find a rational explanation for this but the truth is I wouldn't permit them any discussion until we got back here so all possibility of mutual suggestion was eliminated."

"But it wasn't eliminated," smiled the Seer. "These youngsters had no clear idea of what they had 'seen' until they heard your account just now, an account which filled all the blanks in *their* experience of it."

"That's ridiculous!" Miss Tarns exploded. "I know perfectly well what I saw. There were people and they exist, they really exist!"

"You know perfectly well what you *think* you saw," he corrected. "Dr. Lorwyn is a man of the highest reputation and greatest probity. Naturally you would be influenced—."

"True enough," Staw agreed. "—and, Lorwyn, don't think I'm impugning your motives but didn't you say earlier today that there are brief periods nowadays when you feel very tired? 'Utterly weary of things as they are' was the way you put it."

"I did," he admitted. "Oh, look here, Wirther, I'm not saying with absolute certainty that we saw *people*. But I am certain we were severely shaken up by something."

I AGREE one hundred percent to that, my friend. But let me ask you one thing and here I'll stake my whole argument on your answering yes. Weren't the three of you discussing the 'peo-

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ple-haunting' myth as you entered the alley and as you proceeded down it?"

"Yes. Yes, I do see your point."

"And you had also seen a mass birthing, not a unique sight, to be sure, but certainly a relatively rare one in any individual ghost's lifetime, a birthing which Miss Tarns in her vast ingeniousness undoubtedly managed to connect with her engagingly vivid theories."

"So we did imagine it after all, didn't we?" Staw said, relieved.

"We did not!" she shouted. "Oh, the intolerable smugness of your thinking, refusing to see anything not covered by your ideas!"

"Mustn't excite yourself this way," Lorwyn mumbled. He straightened up and became more decisive. "You must be right, Wirther. I'm glad we straightened it out. For a while, though, you can't imagine how real they were—mind you, I'm not denying the possibility of something like that really existing, Miss Tarns, just its unlikelihood. Very frightening thing to deceive yourself—."

"We *were not* deceived!"

"These were like figures in a dream," Wirther went on implacably. "They moved to the music of your suggestibility and when that was exhausted, being creatures of the lowest and most transient order of appearances, vanished."

"Not of a lower order," she said, calmer now. "They had to be of at least as high an order of reality as we are."

"Why?" the Seer asked.

"Because I experienced one thing these two obviously did not. I sensed what the people were communicating to each other."

"And what was that?"

"At first in that incredible second when they saw us they were frightened and then the man began to think something about some myth story they had been recently watching on the translucent screen and he said to her one thing that made her secure again. He said, 'They do not exist. They are figments of your imagination!'"

For a moment the men were chalk white, appalled by the unexpectedness of what she had just said, but then the Seer gave his broadest smile of all. "Which is the final proof that none of this actually happened." The other men began to laugh also. "Could there be anything more absurd, Miss Tarns, than the notion that *we* only exist in *their* imaginations?"

It was another question that could not receive an answer.

And it did not.

THE END

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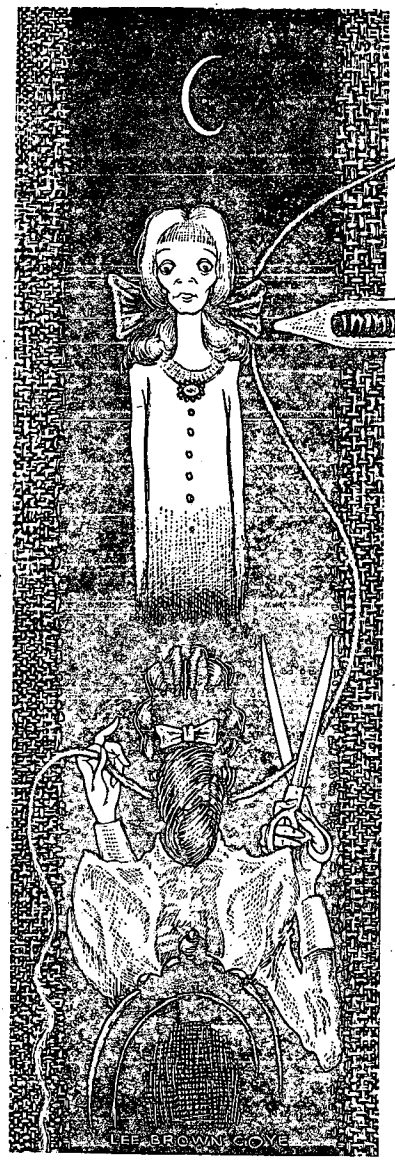

3rd SISTER

By ARTHUR PORGES

There is a tide in the affairs of men . . . and it is as crucial to catch the ebb as the flow.

I REMEMBER being eight when it happened . . .

Judging from old photographs, I was an extremely attractive child, with perfect features and enormous dark eyes that sparkled with animation. That is hardly surprising, when you consider my parents. They were both actors, the descendents of distinguished theatrical

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families going back several generations, all members of which were notable for looks and talent. After a hundred years, there must be a kind of evolutionary selection among such lines, since leading men and women of the stage, given a modicum of ability, prosper according to their profiles.

My father died when I was six, and mother didn't marry again, although there was a succession of men known to me as 'uncles', who shared our life together for a time. They said I took after her, at least in appearance. She was reputed to be one of the most beautiful and witty women of her generation, a Mrs. Pat Campbell—Jane Cowl sort of amalgam.

Not that we spent much time together in those early days. To be sure, she often took me away on her tours; but what with rehearsals, and plays that ran until eleven at night, or even later, we didn't have many hours alone. Yet I loved her passionately: her smile; her warm, lilting voice; the delicate scent she wore; the way she mischievously tugged my hair, or kissed my nose. Beautiful, feminine, fascinating mother. To think she was only thirty when it happened.

I was eight, but like most children of professional people, unusually mature in many ways. We were at home for a change. Home to mother was the small town in Illinois where her parents' house still stood. She came there perhaps once a year for a few weeks, to rest or study a new, more exacting role. This time an "Uncle Carey" was with us in the old, ramshackle building. I remember him as a tall, ironic sophisticate, who tried to amuse me with dry humor that I couldn't possibly understand until years later. But he was an improvement over "Uncle Calvin," a dark, moody type, who ignored me completely.

I THINK that mother was studying the part of Candida, in Shaw's play—a role to enchant any discerning actress. She and Uncle Carey were reading together; I enjoyed their dulcet tones without following much of the dialog. Just as my bedtime came along, mother's voice faltered suddenly; her face became oddly pale; and in a matter of moments, it seemed, there was panic in the old house, as she collapsed. There had been some illness in the little town; probably typhoid, a terrible scourge in those days. Before we knew it, this gay, lovely creature, apparently in the best of health, was fighting for survival.

The over-worked doctor came, and did what he could. With no anti-biotics, it was a matter of anti-toxin and good nursing. Un-

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cle Carey found a competent woman, one of the brisk, no nonsense type, who promptly took over the household. But the serum was not sufficiently potent mother refused to mend, and wavered precariously between life and death.

I went about in a daze. Too young to really believe in death, I had some instinctive knowledge that my mother could somehow be taken from me forever, an intolerable vision. I must have prayed very hard. The others—Uncle Carey, and the servants—were too busy to bother with a child, so I wandered about, pale and distraught, and was usually ordered to go out and play.

The disease finally reached its crisis, and everybody knew that by the next morning mother would be either mending or dead. They were too involved with her to notice my own flushed face, or the over-brightness of my eyes. Late in the afternoon I slipped from the house, and headed down the dusty street. Always a sensitive child, my own illness, with the attendant high fever, had somehow put me in tune with occult forces, and I sought, unknowingly, a source of evil. At least, that was how I judged it at the age of eight, that stifling summer in Illinois, when mother lay dying.

I walked along, between those wonderful old elms, towards the edge of town, coming unerringly to an ancient, sun-dried house, its yard overgrown with weeds and great glowing sunflowers. A few doors away, I met a chubby, tow-headed boy of my own age, whom I knew slightly. In a singsong voice, half delirious, I asked him who lived there.

"Just some ole ladies," he replied contemptuously. "Better stay away; they're crazy, Maw says."

I felt that his mother was wise, for the house seemed a focus of evil. Ignoring the boy, I went up on the sagging porch, and peered through a dusty window. There were three women inside, sharing an old fashioned parlor. They were elderly, but I knew it more by intuition than from their looks, for the three faces, plainly showing some blood relationship among the women, were unlined, even beautiful in a stern, classical way.

Two of them were working with some queer weaving mechanism. Their product was exquisite: a strange, shimmering cloth with a treble-shot, fantastic texture. As the first woman selected certain colored yarn, passing it to the second, the latter wove it dexterously into a pattern, which she apparently improvised with great artistic ingenuity. The third, who merely watched, held a large, golden pair of scissors.

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EVEN as I gazed in wonder at the disturbing scene, this woman spoke.

"It is time to cut the thread," she said, her voice like a silver bell, lacking all human overtones.

The other two paused.

"The pattern is not complete; there are many more fine designs to come," said the woman who was choosing the yarn.

"Yes, I have plans for them," the weaver added.

"It is time to cut the thread," the first speaker insisted. "I know, my sisters. I always know."

I knew, too. By some means, never to become clear to me, I was certain that the pattern, so fine and glittering, was my mother's; and that her thread of life was to be severed. Ordinarily a timid child, I found in my delirium courage far beyond my normal capacity. I sprang to the door, wrenched it open, and faced the awesome trio.

They were surprised. Whoever or whatever they were, my sudden descent upon them was something unexpected. They had enormous, overwhelming presence, but under it I sensed their amazement. An alien had invaded their world. They fixed wide-set grey eyes on me in silence for a moment, then the one choosing threads said quietly: "How did this child get here?"

The weaver replied: "I do not know, sister. It should not have happened."

The one with the golden shears—she whom I feared and hated—said: "Love and innocence can tear the veil. She loves her mother."

"I love her!" I sobbed. "You must not cut the thread! I won't let you."

Their severe, classic features were devoid of pity. Passionless, unmoved, terrible, they sat there. Only the golden scissors in the third woman's exquisite, long fingers opened and closed like the jaws of a wild beast.

Finally the one who held it said: "The thread must be cut. I know. I always know the right time."

I stepped towards her, my tiny fists clenched.

"No! I won't let you. You nasty old women. I'll tell Sheriff Bill. He'll lock you up in his jail." I was threatening these immortals with an old, ineffectual sot. I could weep now at the irony of it.

"We have delayed long enough," the weaver said. "If you must cut, Atropos, do it now."

The long thread, glowing in the light of the setting sun that streamed through the window, was extended, and the shears moved forward.

"No!" I screamed. "No!" And I stood directly between them,

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my breast almost touching the sharp, open points.

"Cut!" the thread-chooser cried.

"Cut now, sister!" the weaver echoed. "Quickly, or we will be too late."

The chill grey eyes of the woman called Atropos found my own, feverish and glowing with fanatic determination.

"Stand aside, child. You don't know what you are doing."

"You can't have my mother. I love her. I don't want to live without her!"

"Cut the thread!"

"Cut immediately; the sand runs out; the moment passes. Cut, cut!"

"I cannot," Atropos said. "She is too strong. The power of love and innocence prevails. Her illness has given her strength to pass the forbidden veil. Sisters, I cannot sever the golden thread."

"Too late," said the one choosing yarn, as she reached for fresh strands.

"Too late," the weaver agreed. "I must find a new pattern, and go on after all."

"Foolish child," Atropos said in her level, brightly-metallic voice. "What have you done?"

"You won't cut it?" You won't cut my mother's thread?"

"I cannot; the time has passed. There will come another proper moment, but who can say when, now? I might pity you, if I could. Leave us, child, the damage is done."

I STUMBLED out of that room, into the hot, sultry street, past the wide-eyed boy, who shrank away from me. Somehow I got home, where my incoherent story was ascribed to delirium—an explanation that cannot be disproved. I spent ten days in bed, but when I recovered, my mother, laughing and beautiful once more, was there beside me.

She is still there, right across the room. A blind, drooling woman of ninety-eight. There is nothing left of the wit and beauty that entranced two continents. It all vanished nearly fifty years ago. And I—I am a barren spinster of seventy-nine, still fastened, as I have been for so long, to that dying animal across the room. I have spent my life caring for her who should have died young, lovely, and adored, as the Third Sister would have ordained. Fool that I was to meddle! Atropos, of the golden shears, wherever you are, pity me, and cut two threads today.

THE END

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Soviet theology holds that there is no theology. No gods, no angels; and, therefore, no devils, no werewolves, no vampires. It is interesting therefore, to eavesdrop on the encounter between comissar and vampire . . .

On the Road to Splenoba

By ROGER ZELAZNY

BABAKOV pulled his car to the side of the goat trail that was the village street. The ancient buildings leaned at dangerous angles. Peasants, like so many wooden posts, stood beside the road.

"You there!" He leaned from the window and addressed a man in shaggy trousers. "I'm going to Splenoba. Is there a place along the road where I can stop overnight?"

The man did not stir. His face

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remained expressionless. He said nothing.

Babakov got out of his car and crossed the street. He repeated the question in Serbo-Croatian.

The man stared at him. Finally, his lips moved.

"No."

Babakov ran his hands through his graying hair. His mouth twitched.

"I must go on, if I am to be in Splenoba tomorrow—and I can't drive all night. I'm not well."

He looked about and sniffed disapprovingly, wiping moist palms on his trouser legs.

"Isn't there any lodging before Splenoba? I can't stay here."

"No," the man repeated.

Babakov reached inside his baggy jacket and withdrew a map. He unfolded it and pointed.

"There is an old castle marked. Does anyone live there?"

"No!" An expression finally changed the wooden face. Muscles twitched. "No one lives there!"

Was it fear that he read, or simply annoyance at an outsider's questions?

"I will stop there," he ventured.

"No! He is evil!"

"Who?"

"The Baron. Clementowicz." The man crossed himself as he said the name. "He is evil."

Babakov frowned at the gesture. But it was not his job to educate the peasants, he decided, and the man was stupid—too stupid even to notice he had been caught in a lie.

"Nevertheless," Babakov insisted, "I will stop there. He will be honored to shelter an official of the People's Party."

"He will shelter you," the peasant said, "and may God preserve you."

"Thank you," Babakov replied, uncertain why he had said it. Perhaps his own peasant blood had spoken, he reasoned. It was nothing to be ashamed of, it was good to be of the proletariat.

He made his way back to the car.

THE grayness shaded through twilight into blackness. Peaks and crests of the distant ridges seemed to draw nearer, to bend over the road like gnarled old men leaning toward the fire of his headlight beams. The bright-faced moon rustled aside a curtain of cloud, peered down a moment, then withdrew. Babakov depressed the accellerator as the road began an upward winding.

Steadily he climbed, the transmission groaning and muttering.

Ahead, a mass of blackness shrugged, setting itself apart from the mountains. He drew nearer and its lights became distinguishable from the stars; finally, they were windows.

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It was a massive sprawl, a jagtooth of parapet and tower, set atop a dark island of stones.

He slowed; the road forked abruptly, the trail to the left clearly heading toward the castle.

Nosing the ancient vehicle about, he headed in that direction.

The trail had not been intended for automobiles. He slowed to a crawl, bumping through pot-holes and ruts.

Finally, the road ran into a pair of iron gates, set ajar.

Careful not to scrape a fender, he drove between them, and into a darkened courtyard.

When he had finished parking, a light appeared. A torch bobbed across the courtyard in his direction.

As the man approached, Babakov made out his features.

Goodness! Ugly, short, and misshapen! he thought. Like figures recalled from the stories of his boyhood—told about the hearth by equally ugly old women.

"Good evening," he addressed the nightmare. "I am Babakov, an official of the People's Party. I am going to Splenoba, but would like to spend the night here."

The gnome bowed, and the torch in his right hand did awful things to the ridges of his brow, his beard.

"Come with me," he flickered, "I will take you to the Baron."

Babakov pursed his lips and followed:

"Comrade," he said, "there are no Barons, no Counts or Dukes. We are a free people, and all are equal."

The gnome chuckled.

"The Baron has no equal," he said, entering into a great doorway.

Babakov did not reply. It would not do to denigrate his host, and what did the opinions of a senile dwarf matter? In his youth he would have argued with anyone, anywhere, but he was requesting hospitality, and if Clementowicz was an eccentric, all right, so were many members of the Party.

He entered, pausing to gaze about the shrouded hall. Again, a feeling from his boyhood seized him, involuntarily. *The great ones live in such places,* his uncle had said. *They are not for such as we.*

And he felt that way now. He did not belong here. It was too fine, too majestic, even in shadow and dilapidation. But he thought of the Revolution, of the blood of aristocratic exploiters flowing in gutters, and he lighted a Sobranie. He forced a smile, but put the burnt-out match into his pocket.

They wound through corridors, deep within the stony recesses of the building; then stopped.

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"Baron Clementowicz is in there," said the gnome, and Babakov looked at the massive oaken door.

He exhaled smoke and knocked.

AFTER a moment the door opened.

The Baron was tall, at least six feet, dwarfing the stocky Babakov. The light from behind him was dim, and his face hard to make out. Realizing this, Babakov suddenly looked about. The servant was gone.

"Good evening, Mister Clementowicz," he said. "I am Babakov. I am on my way to Splenoba, and I would like to rest here for the night."

"Of course, Mister Babakov," the Baron bowed. "I should be delighted to have you as a guest. Won't you come in?"

He stood aside and held open the door.

Babakov entered the room.

"Won't you sit down?"

He settled into a large chair and looked about him. The walls were lined with books. Something across the room, either a painting or a mirror, was covered with black cloth. There was one small window.

The Baron seated himself in a chair opposite Babakov. He retrieved a cigarette from an ornate ashtray stand and puffed on it, looking up into the smoke. The light from the two oil lamps, one on the desk, one on a table, showed his face.

He is young, thought Babakov, *with the same dissipated, weak features we use in the pamphlets. But he may also be strong, with those lines about the eyes, with those high cheekbones . . . He is an intellectual . . . And what sharp teeth he has!*

"So you are going to Splenoba."

"Yes, I have an appointment there tomorrow, and your castle was the only place between it and the village."

Clementowicz laughed.

"The village! Yes! It has no name. A very dreary, provincial place—almost primeval! They hate me there."

Babakov had been wondering how to broach the subject, how to satisfy his curiosity.

"So I noticed," he said. "The villagers warned me not to stop here."

The Baron flicked off an ash which had fallen onto his dark dressing gown.

"Yes," he said, "they all think that I am a vampire."

Babakov snorted.

"Petty bourgeois romanticism!"

"That is precisely what I have told them. But whenever anyone develops anemia they look to the castle," he smiled, "—and I *do* have bats in the belfry, but

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they're only the ordinary kind."

Babakov laughed. He wasn't a bad fellow at that!

"I keep a guest bedroom, upstairs, prepared for travellers through here. It is all made up, and I'm sure you will find it adequate."

Babakov nodded.

"I'm certain I will."

"Would you care for a bit of brandy? Or some wine?" Clementowicz offered.

"Thank you. Yes, I could use a drink."

THE Baron was on his feet. He crossed to a wall shelf which, amidst books, held numerous bottles, glasses, swizzles, openers, and measures.

"How about Hine?"

"Excellent."

Clementowicz smiled again, and poured him a large snifter from the bottle with the deer on the label.

"Aren't you drinking?"

"Gracious, no. I've had my fill for this evening, and I can't drink when I smoke."

Babakov accepted the balloon and snuffed out his cigarette. He remembered noticing that the nobility had never smoked when drinking.

"Thank you."

He sniffed it, just as he had seen them do, when he had served at their tables as a boy.

Late apples and a cool, hillside night. He rolled it about his mouth and smiled.

"Delicious."

"Thank you. Had I known you were coming I should have sent to my cellars for something better."

"This is fine enough for me."

He looked at the shelves.

"I see you read Engels, and Lenin. That is good."

"Yes," Clementowicz replied, "also Proust, Kafka, and Faulkner."

"Hm. They smack of the decadent."

"True," said the Baron, "But one *must* know of these things."

"I suppose so."

Clementowicz yawned, politely.

"For that matter, so is Cognac."

Babakov laughed.

"Yes, but life is short."

"How certain that is! And it has been long since I have talked with men.—As I understand it, the People's Party now rules half the world."

"Yes," answered Babakov, "and soon the other half will be free, when the workers throw off their chains and smash their exploiters."

He finished his drink.

CLEMENTOWICZ rose and fetched the bottle. He refilled the baloon halfway.

"Yes, I suppose so. But do you

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really think it is good to destroy their religion, their superstitions—?"

"Opium!" Babakov answered. "Drugs to palliate slavery!"

"Is not a certain amount of slavery what makes life bearable for men?"

"Man must be free!" cried Babakov, realizing he had spoken too loudly for this polite atmosphere. Still, the man must know where he stood. He was no bootlicker, no toady to the upper classes, in whatever archaic pocket of the country they survived. In fact, he should file a report on this when he returned to Titograd.

"Perhaps you are right," said the Baron. "Will men all be like you if they are freed?"

"Yes."

Babakov downed his drink.

Then Clementowicz yawned once more, and Babakov suddenly realized that it might be a hint.

"Perhaps, if you would show me my room—"

"But certainly."

The Baron rose and crossed to the door, which he again held open.

Babakov went through it. He followed Clementowicz up the long hall.

They climbed a high flight of stairs, and the Baron opened a door at the head of the stairway.

"My man found a suitcase on the front seat of your vehicle," he said, "it is beside the dresser. The room should contain everything you need—if not, pull that cord for a servant." He pointed at a purple cord hanging beside the ancient dresser.

"Thank you, and good-night."

"Good night."

Babakov entered. A lamp flickered on the dresser, and his suitcase stood on the floor.

The door closed behind him.

He crossed to the bed. The covers had been turned back.

Opening his suitcase, he found his pajamas, his pills.

As he undressed he wondered: How had Clementowicz known his suitcase was here?

SLEEP came almost instantly. *The brandy,* he reflected, as he drowsed off. *I must buy some Hine when I get back to civilization . . .*

How long he had slept he did not know, when the nightmare came burning through the fogs of sleep.

Suddenly, it was as if he was not alone. For an unknown reason he was shaking all over, trying desperately to move.

An attack! he thought. But there was no pain in his chest. His muscles would not obey him, but they shook of their own accord, and he felt his face twitching.

It seemed as if a shadow had

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detached itself from the wall and was flowing toward him.

It coalesced beside the bed, and hovered over him.

It is mad! he told himself. *Shadows do not walk! The ignorant and the decadent frighten themselves with such things!*

And the Baron's laugh, like the trumpet of a dark Judgment, seemed to roll about him.

Then all was tar and satin and the inside of a closet, a chimney . . . He felt a pain in his throat, and a soothing fire swept through him.

"Comrade!" he cried. "Tovarisch Marx! God. . . ! Do not —"

* * *

HE awakened to the pre-dawn tittering of a bird, laughing its song through the mothy curtains.

He moaned softly.

No!—Two drinks do not do that to a man!

He was desperately ill, he realized. He had waited too long. But his duties!—His duties to the Party—to the People . . .

He rolled from the bed and fell to his knees beside it.

Crawling, he crossed the room to the dresser. With febble hands he groped for his pills.

Shakily, he opened the bottle.

Better take three!

He gulped them, then rolled over onto his back.

—It will pass, it will pass. I will ring for help in a minute.

He crawled again, reaching for the bell-pull. He dragged heavily upon it, and then collapsed once more.

How long! he wondered, after an interminable time. *How long?*

Finally, he arose, staggered to the door. For a long while he leaned against it.

Then he pulled it open and walked to the head of the stairs. Tottering, he looked down. It was then that he noticed the dried blood on his pajama tops.

He felt his throat. It was numb, anesthetized, and tingling weakly, as though shot full of novocaine.

Leaning against the great banister, he descended, a step at a time.

No! he thought. *We destroyed you with Easter and Christmas, with serfdom and witchery. We killed you along with the fat, pig-eyed bourgeoisie, and the lean, depraved aristocrat. We drove a stake through your unholy heart when we tattooed walls with their brains—you are dead! You never lived at all, save in the stories of old crones, in the wide-eyed imagination of children! You do not exist!*

He reeled down the corridor, suppressing his stomach's demand to retch. Reaching the library door, he scratched and scrabbled at it until it swung inward.

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Then he fell again, and lay there panting.

CLEMENTOWICZ regarded him through a steeple of fingers, but he did not rise from the desk.

"I'm ill!" Babakov croaked. "Please! I must be driven to the hospital at Splenoba for a transfusion. I'm overdue!"

"I should say so," replied the Baron. "You are very sick. I, of course, am dying. So I am afraid I cannot be of much assistance."

Through bloodshot eyes Babakov regarded him. —Dying? "What's wrong with you?"

"Tell me what is wrong wih you," Clementowicz replied, "and perhaps I can answer your question."

"I have leukemia," Babakov answered, crawling to a chair. "I need another blood transfusion —soon!"

"Leukemia is a blood disease?"

"Yes, cancer of the blood."

Clementowicz rose, poured out a drink.

"Have some Cognac."

"I don't know if I should."

"Go ahead. It will be your last."

Babakov gulped the caramel fires, his stomach came alive.

"Your blood is foul, Babakov," said the Baron. "Foul! It is unclean, and it has poisoned me."

He seated himself again, looking off into the distance.

"In a way, it is well," he said, after a long time. "If all men who become free also become men like you, then my time is past.

"When men no longer taste like men, when my only prey has become less than the beasts of the field," he went on, "then my time, too, has come."

Babakov struggled to remain conscious. Accepting the drink had been a mistake.

"I pity the world of men," Clementowicz continued. "I am not of it, but I have been in it. Soon the sun will rise upon that world, and I shall sit here to welcome it. It will be the first sunrise I have seen in many centuries—and the last.

"But if that sun will always shine upon men of your blood, then it were better that all men died now," he pronounced. "I hope that your Engels and your Lenins never replace the religion that I hate, or the superstitions I have battened upon. You Babakov, have more blood on your hands than I have ever drunk. In destroying the gods of light you are also destroying the Dark Ones. We shall be avenged!"

Babakov tried to scream, but his throat was a piece of wood. A fog crossed before his eyes, and, in the distance, he heard Clementowicz' voice:

"I'll see you in hell, Commissar."

THE END

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FANTASY BOOKS

By S. E. COTTS

The publishers of Mr. Bradbury's most recent book have made a point to stress that it is fantasy rather than science fiction. Therefore, it is reviewed here in that catetgory.

Something Wicked This Way Comes. *By Ray Bradbury. 317 pp. Simon and Schuster. $4.95.*

I won't go as far as one critic, who was so forthright as to call Mr. Bradbury's first full-length fantasy novel a "disastrously bad idea and a stupifying bore," but it is my unhappy duty to say that taken in overall terms, the book never gets off the ground. It has moments of beauty, some memorable flashes of character, and a philosophy that is consistent throughout, but these elements do not cohere to make the kind of reading experience that Bradbury fans have come to expect.

Not very much really happens in the way of outward action. A carnival comes to a small mid-Western town. But it comes in October, when carnivals don't usually stop by, nor is that the only thing that appears strange to Jim Nightshade and Bill Halloway, almost-14-year-old best friends. They had crept out, as all boys will, to watch the carnival arrive and set up in the early hours of the morning, and they were chilled at what they saw—a locomotive that seemed to run itself, black pennants, tents made from clouds, strange music. Because they had seen a hint of the evil that lurks behind the carnival facade, they continue to spy in helpless fascination. Soon it becomes apparent that their spying has not gone unnoticed, and they are actively pursued. But are their pursuers carnival beings, their own worst natures, or Evil itself?

Mr. Bradbury has garnished all the traditional carnival entertainments with what he obviously feels are ominous overtones—the sideshow, the carousel, the house of mirrors are not at all what they seem. But when Mr. Bradbury comes down to describing what he has only hinted at before, one of two things invariably happens. Either the fact is much less chilling than all the buildup has led the reader to expect, or his accumulated images

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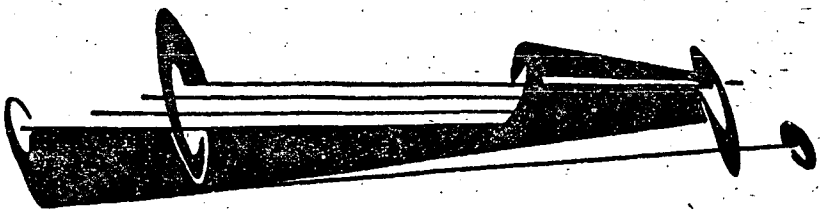
have piled up so, it hardly seems possible he can find one to cap the mountain, and when he does it is so labored I can almost hear it puff and wheeze in its effort to gain the top. He expends such prodigious care in the description of each new character and house and street and stone in the beginning, that he has run himself out just at the places in the story that scream for the most.

There are many parts of great individual beauty, chapters and sections that could come right out of the novel and stand alone. But a novel which has too many independent parts is no longer a novel, but just a series of sketches. Mr. Bradbury hasn't lost his old power, just spread it too thin here. The Prologue, for instance, or the scene where Will and his father talk on the porch and then climb up the drainpipe one after the other are as fine as anything he ever wrote. On the other hand, all his many pages about the horror of Cooger and Dark's (the name of the carnival) do not begin to have the effect of his one little short story about a carnival mirror maze called "The Dwarfs."

Now there is no reason why the kind of writing that illumines these small parts and stories cannot be done successfully in a long novel, but it is an extremely delicate process, one which Mr. Bradbury has not yet mastered and was, perhaps, ill-advised to attempt. The fantasy, as he writes it anyway, is one of the most fragile of forms. It can be enlarged only with the greatest care. Like a matchstick house or a Calder mobile, too much weight, one stick too many may bring the whole edifice tumbling, or destroy the balance of the parts one to the other. It may be though, that in this failure there is a lesson. Perhaps Mr. Bradbury's earlier works were truer to his nature, perhaps he is really a miniaturist, a master of the smaller forms; there is certainly no disgrace in this. (After all, Schumann's songs surpass his symphonies, each brief page an endless world in itself.) This ability to suspend time for the audience is one of Bradbury's strongest, truest gifts. Anyone with such a talent to capsulize experience need feel no other compulsion.



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(Continued from page 6)

Dear editor, your covers may be the most fabulous in the world (they are not) but it is the contents they cover that count. A good cover only adds to the quality of the magazine; it does not make it. Do try to remember this, occasionally.

Miss Paula D. Crunk
318 W. School St.,
Compton, California

● *We, likewise, are bemused but gratified at your qualified praise.*

Dear Editor:

ENCORE!!!!! Please, MORE Gray Mouser stories!!! Do you think you could persuade Mr. Leiber to write a sequel directly following this earliest episode in the Gray Mouser's life? It leaves one feeling that one MUST find out what happens next! The character of Ivrian pleads for further development, to note only one point in favor of a direct sequel. Is there any chance of a book of Gray Mouser stories, tying everything together and developing characters other than the Mouser a bit more completely? Please bring us more stories of the type, quality, & caliber of "The Unholy Grail" (which means, of course, they must be written by Mr. Leiber!)—never mind the science fiction stories, that's what AMAZING is for; they make an ideal pair, but FANTASTIC should stick to good fantasy. Finlay is still tops with illustrations; do use more of his work!

Burnice F. Wyszkowski
Box 3372, Postal Station C
Ottawa 3, Canada

● *Can't guarantee when the next Mouser will appear, but Leiber has a cover story in our February issue.*

Dear Editor:

It seems I just cannot resist commenting on your October issue—it was magnificent! Especially with that wild and *weird* Emsh cover. The story it illustrated sure was no disappointment, either. It is my opinion that Leiber is definitely best at writing fantasy and adventure, or horror. His other stories are good, too, but sometimes they take on a rather dull or drawn out nature. But this tale of Mouse was really superb, terrific. Especially were the descriptions vivid, character development too, and . . . the entire story was simply magnificent, is all I can say. It would easily make a fabulous movie, too, in color and cinemascope, but that is probably wishing for too much. I shall content myself with saying, asking for, MORE GREY MOUSER STORIES!

Bob Adolfsen,
9 Prospect Ave.,
Sea Cliff, N.Y.

● *We thought it was quite a*

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cover, too, but a lot of readers say it makes them want to sneeze.

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

I've just finished rereading the October issue of FANTASTIC, and enjoyed every fantastic minute of it. Mainly because of the added attraction of a Leiber story and a sword and sorcery one at that. While I like Emsh and think that he is the best of the contemporary science fiction illustrators, I also think that maybe artists like Barr, Ivie, Krenkel or one of the English artists like Cawthorn or Jones could have done better justice to a heroic fantasy such as the "Unholy Grail." The title is another complaint (very slight). I think that the original title "The Duke Must Die" fitted a little better. Mainly because I couldn't find any reference within the story to any sort of grail. I have a vague notion that the term "Unholy Grail" represents Mouse's tendency towards drinking from the forbidden cup of knowledge that is black magic. I'm probably parsecs off the mark, but, that's what I think. On the whole my comment is more, More, MORE!

Seeing as everybody else is, I might as well get in on that hot controversy that's centered on Bunch and his stories. I can't say anything about Bunch as I don't know the man. But, I do not like his stories, probably because I don't understand them (I don't think that he does either). I also have a strong suspicion that if I understood his stories I would like them even less. I liken his stories to cleaned up and science fictionalized versions of "Tropic of Cancer." Of which book I read five or six pages and then developed an extreme case of the mental heaves. So much for Bunch.

As for Mr. Cox, I didn't mind what he said to me, but I couldn't let him get away with what he said about fantasy. The only dust that I intend to fade into is the cloud of dust that was raised by the madly happy fans that galloped off to their nearest newsstand to buy the October issue of FANTASTIC that was led off by Fritz Leiber's fantasy (non-science fictional) story "The Unholy Grail." How can he dare to say that fantasy is only science fiction in disguise, when its obvious to even the blindest boob that fantasy is the father of science fiction. Fantasy was around long before sf was even a gleam in Hugo Gernsback's eye and its a crying shame someone doesn't have the brains to recognize this. The myths, folk legends and fairy tales are probably the earliest examples of man's attempt at any sort of story telling and literature and they are patently fantasy of the purest and high-

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est sort. Let Mr. Cox read Howard's Conan stories, Tolkein's Lord of the Rings series, Anderson's "The Broken Sword," Leiber's Fafhrd-Gray Mouser stories and Eddison's "The Worm Ouroboros." If those are science fiction of any sort I'll eat them from cover to cover. Those stories are examples of the highest type of modern fantasy and there is much more besides, so much more that it would take up half of your magazine to list them. It was fantastical (mind that word fantasy) thinking that led to sf. And if Mr. Cox cares to debate the obvious merits of fantasy as opposed to the not as good merits of sf, he can either write to me (he has my address) or he can write to you. I would much prefer to have him do the other, then everybody can have a chance at him.

Lawrence D. Kafka
2819 Morris Ave.,
Bronx 68, N.Y.

● *Why can't you understand Bunch's stories? To us, they seem clearly to be magnificent apparitions of a civilization that has given up completely on warmth, love, flesh and personal relationship, and gone all the way toward a sterile, hate-filled personal isolation.*

Dear Editor:

Emsh's cover on the October FANTASTIC was the best cover of the year, not just for FANTASTIC but, for the entire field. It went well with Leiber's "The Unholy Grail" which was superlative.

I also liked the Emsh interior illustrations for the story. They made my enjoyment complete.

In regard to Mrs. Stewart's letter and your smashing reply. I want to say that I *like* Bunch. His stories are *not* trivial, and I think his short stories are an asset to the magazine every time they appear. Mrs. Stewart can skip them if she wants to but, I think she's missing something.

Arnold Katz
98 Patton Blvd.,
New Hyde Park, N.Y.

● *Emsh has another cover up coming on an early 1963 issue which we think you'll find equally masterful.*

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